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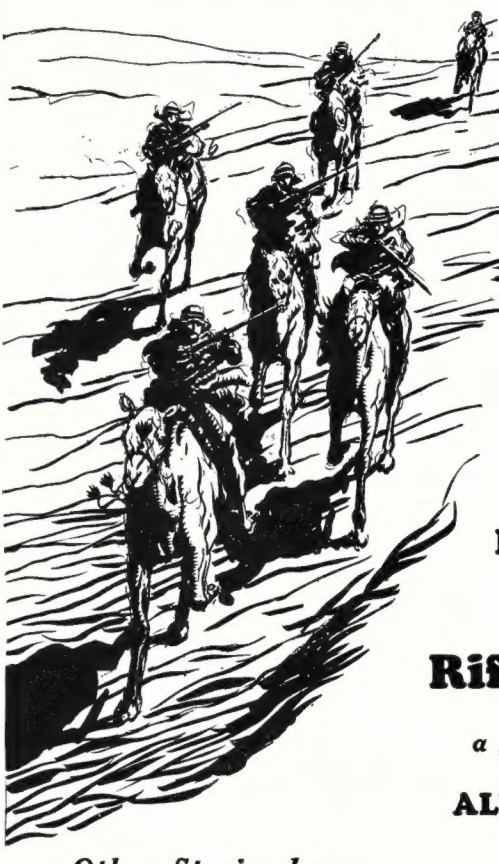

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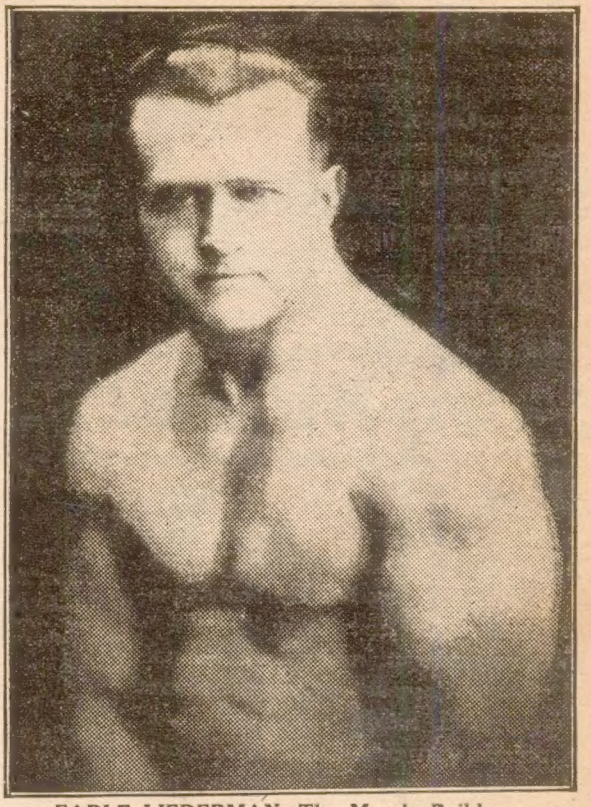

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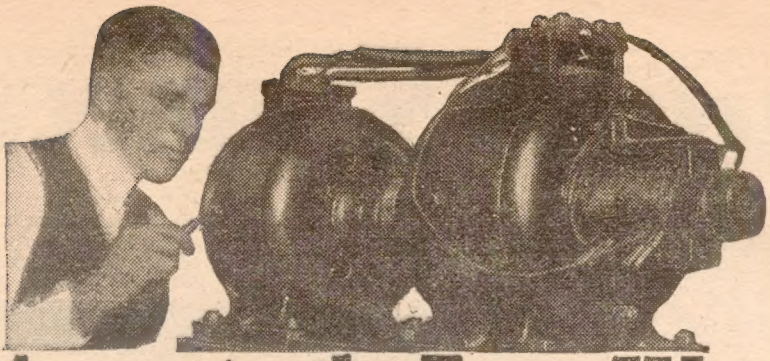

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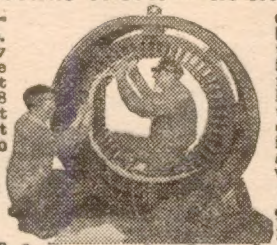

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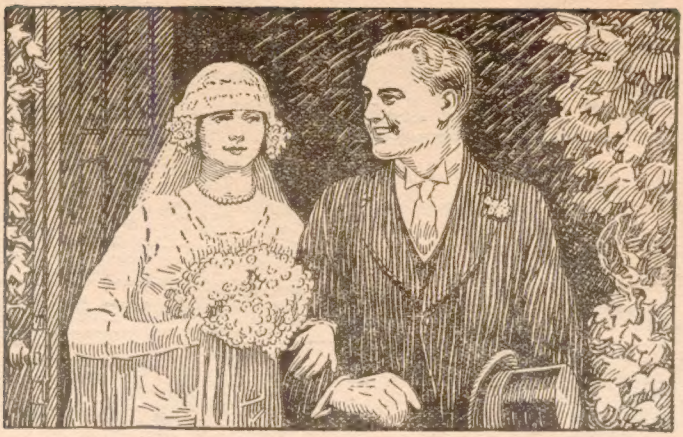

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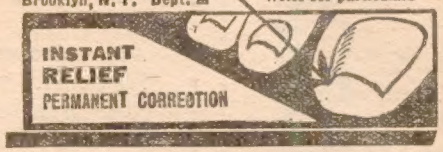

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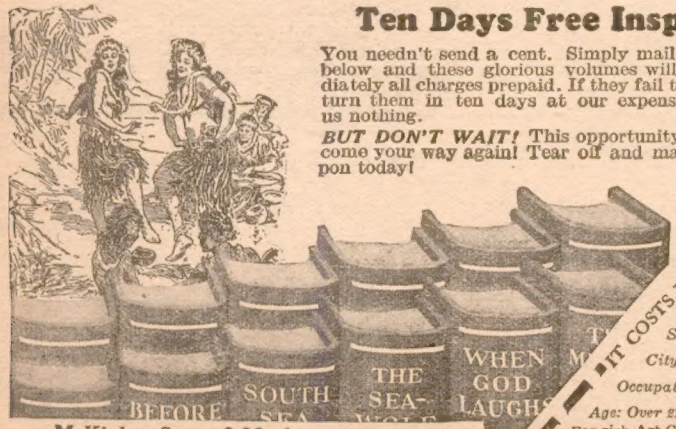

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CHAPTER I

DEATH CREEK

WITH immediate action, after the manner of those to whom life has many times depended upon split second thinking and acting, big Jim Bedford responded to emergency. The sharp, whistling crackle of the highpower bullet, crashing through the edge of the windshield, was not out of his ears before he had jerked on his emergency brake, thrown the car out of gear and dived over the side, yanking his Springfield from its scabbard behind him as he went.

Crouching against the fender, peering over the hood of the car, Bedford worked the bolt of his rifle, throwing a cartridge into the chamber. The bullet had come from somewhere over to the right front, striking the left edge of

the windshield and going out through the windshield post. Bedford could see nothing whatever on the savage, towering ridge to the right to give him any indication of where the marksman was hidden. Just possibly there was no marksman there. It might have been a stray bullet from some far-off hunter's gun. But Jim Bedford, Border trained, was inclined to believe otherwise.

He raised his head slowly, staring across the dusty hood, examining the ridge side minutely. There were a score of places up there where a hidden killer might hide, but not a sign of life. Perhaps it had been just an accidental shot. He started to straighten up—*spang, wheee!* The second bullet had slashed an inch long gash in the top of the hood, the wind of its ricocheting passage slapping his face. Instantly Jim Bedford had flung himself sideways and down, flat on the ground, thrusting his rifle barrel between the spokes of the left, front wheel.

Stray shot the devil! Somebody up there on the very top of the ridge evidently was doing his darndest to put a conclusive period after the career of one Jim Bedford. Bedford's searching eyes had seen the movement of the unknown's rifle barrel thrusting cautiously out through a niche between two giant slabs of rock, just before that second bullet had come crackling down. And that second bullet had come close, entirely too close. It had buzzed instead of whining.

Bedford slid his sight up, aiming at the niche from which the second bullet had come. It was a difficult target at best, upward at an angle of nearly thirty degrees; and the light was almost gone. Thirty minutes more and it would be dark. Bedford now could see nothing at all to shoot at. Grimly he waited.

The sun, already below the ridgetops, was blazoning the ragged crest, making the jagged masses of rock stand out in sharp silhouette while the narrow valley in which Bedford lay was entirely in shadow. Lying motionless, Jim Bedford saw something white bob up behind the niche in the rocks, something that looked like the crown of a Stetson.

Bedford smiled. "Maybe it is just a stick in that hat, instead of yore head, hombre," he said softly. "Anyway I'll spoil the hat." From the muzzle of the Springfield spat a tongue of flat fire and the half seen hat jerked abruptly and dropped out of sight. Working the bolt, Bedford placed another bullet, a trifle lower down, knocking splinters of rock into the niche. There was no answer.

Another wait. The dusk was thickening rapidly now down in the narrow, steep walled valley. Impatiently Jim Bedford stood up. He thought he saw a tiny, winking flash, low and almost directly to the front. A crackling bullet slapped overhead, buried itself in the ground fifty feet or more to the rear kicking up a yard high splash of white dust. Twisting about, Jim Bedford emptied his magazine at the spot where he had seen the flash.

Nothing came back. Listening, Jim thought he heard the faint, far distant roar of a motor, an automobile with the muffler cut out it sounded like, but the sound was so faint it was just a ghost, almost instantly gone. He slipped a fresh clip into the magazine of his Springfield sporter, shoving a sixth shell into the chamber, automatically flicking on the safety on the bolt. A tiny, perplexed frown was on his forehead. Just what the little war had been about he had no idea.

ALL afternoon Jim Bedford had been working the battered car along the seldom used twisting trails coming up through the Big Bend country of far west Texas—the wild, desolate country of the section east and south of El Paso, where the Rio Grande makes its giant, southward loop. A telegram had summoned him northward from the isolated little cattle and mining town on the north bank of the shallow, sprawling river and he had gotten to within thirty miles of his goal, the new Death Creek oil pool and its tumultuous boom town also called Death Creek, when the shot through the windshield had stopped him.

It was practically dark by now, so nearly so that there was little need to worry about a distant rifleman, though a man closer up with a six-shooter might do some damage. Climbing back behind the wheel of his car and thrusting his Springfield back into its scabbard, Bedford slipped his Colt New Service out of its shoulder holster, laid it in his lap and started the car forward.

If he turned around and went back

he would have to go at least thirty or forty miles out of his way and it looked like the unknown on the ridgetop had not been making any serious effort to kill him. Instead it rather looked like the hidden rifleman had merely been trying to halt the approaching car for some reason or other. And then, his purpose accomplished, he had decamped. What was it, a robbery or something going on, farther up the road —or what?

It had been a year or so since Bedford had been through this part of the country but as far as he knew there was not a ranch-house, not even a squalid Mexican sheep herder's jacal for miles. This road, leading down into a wild, mountainous section was very seldom used, in fact he had not passed a car or even a horse and rider since one o'clock.

There were a number of gents who might be expected to take extreme delight in catching Jim Bedford out by himself in a lonely place like this and then lobbing a highpower bullet through his skull from some convenient concealment, but as far as Bedford knew, none of them were up in the Death Creek area and if they were, they could not have known that Bedford was driving over. In fact Bedford himself hadn't known it until this morning and he didn't know yet exactly what he was going for. Orders from Austin had simply said, "Keep your teeth closed and go see the sheriff of Patrick County."

He sent the car on, driving as fast as the rough state of the trail allowed. The track twisted abruptly to the right, clambering sharply up and through a gap in the ridge, then turning left again, striking out across a rolling wilderness of brush covered land. And still there was nothing in sight.

Bedford scratched his head. Something decidedly funny about this monkey business. What had the hombre on the hill been trying to do anyway, amuse himself?

His sharp eyes caught a mark to the right of the trail and he stopped the car, straining his eyes through the dusk. There was where a car had stood, its tire marks plain in the sand just off the track, close against the sheer bank which ended the spur coming down from the ridge. And there, coming down the bank, were the long, deep heelmarks where somebody, almost beyond doubt the rifleman, had come plunging down to enter the car. He must have fired that last shot from the juncture of the spur with the ridge, back up about a hundred yards.

Jim Bedford's gray eyes narrowed. Not much hope looking for the elusive windshield potter, at least not in the dark and it was that now, dark enough to need the headlights on. And still there wasn't a sign of any reason for the late performance, no house, no car in the road with hijacked or murdered occupants, nothing at all.

JIM BEDFORD scratched his head again, his eyes puzzled. "Reckon I might as well go on into town," he told himself softly. "Maybe I'll run onto the hombre somewhere and if so I'll up and ask him was he playin' or what."

He switched on his headlights, started onward again, pressing down a little harder on the accelerator pedal. A speeding car in the dark is easy enough to spot of course, if it has its lights on, but then it's not such an easy job to hit the driver. Of course the twenty-five or thirty miles an hour gait that was all the condition of the road allowed wasn't exactly blurring speed but with the up and down motion as well—well the unknown would have to be pretty good if he was waiting somewhere up ahead for another shot and did succeed in terminating the driver this time.

But nothing happened. The last faint traces of light in the west disappeared. Night came down like a blanket, deep, thick, black, with the stars overhead hanging close, like great, golden lamps. The trail wound interminably up, around, over, and down, jolting up across jagged, savage ledges of rock; down again, through alkali flats, over tough, jutting roots and stumps in the track.

Fully five miles before he reached the town, Jim Bedford saw the lights, faint, twinkling dots, far off and thinly scattered. The brighter haze in about the center and coming up from behind a black horizon ridge, Bedford knew, was the glow from the lights of the boom town itself. The other lights visible, were the gas flares and lights on

the drilling or producing wells, the lease buildings, oil tanks and machinery. They were scattered clear across the yawning, black gulf that was, he knew, the valley of Death Creek. Some of the bright dots seemed to be clinging to the towering sides of the valley; others were across the flat, still others clear up atop the ridges. The topography in the Death Creek oilfield was said to be among the most extreme of all Mid-Continent oilfields and seeing the lights, one could readily believe it.

Bedford was topping the last great spur before reaching the town. Ahead in the vast sea of blackness he could see the many lights of Death Creek itself. Trucks and cars, their headlights glittering like strange jewels, were moving in swarms on all the roads in and about the town. And over beyond, extending on to the north horizon, Bedford could see more car lights, an endless, crawling string of them, marking the main highway from Death Creek to Red Gap, the supply town on the railroad, forty miles to the northward. Over that swarming road had come practically every bit of lumber, of machinery, casing, tools, everything that the Death Creek field was using, brought by giant trucks coming and going in an endless procession.

Jim dropped down the side of the valley wall, coming into the field. He passed a drilling well, perched high on the side of a towering knob, looking strangely out of place away up there and glittering with lights like a regular merry-go-round. A stubby, little drilling machine it was, no derrick at all, using just a single, heavy mast instead. Death Creek was a shallow field, the wells not requiring the heavy derricks usually met with in deeper oil pools.

There were lights on every side now, lights high above, almost directly overhead as he passed by some well clinging high on the ridgeside, lights far out and up and down the valley. Even in the waters of Death Creek itself there were wells, their lights reflected in the running stream. Death Creek—its waters were so hard, so filled with alkali, that it was a standing joke among oil operators that the creekbed wells had to take a day or two just to drill through the water. Death Creek had been one stream to keep on running during the terrible years of the Big Drouth in West Texas. That was, incidentally, how it had acquired its gruesome name; thirst crazed cattle had drunk its waters and had died in scores along its banks. It was another standing joke that the waters of Death Creek, bottled and labeled, were sold as bootleg booze in other sections of Texas.

BEDFORD swung into the town itself, dodging through the swarming cars and trucks. One long, straggling Main Street was practically all there was to the town, but the one street was nearly a mile long. And at the other end of it somewhere was the new courthouse and sheriff's office, as yet just a hasty frame building. The county seat had been moved over from Sweet Wells, the only previous town in Patrick County, and with the removal of the county seat Sweet Wells had literally dried up and blown away.

Jim Bedford had tucked his six-gun back into its holster as he came into town. He swung the battered car leisurely down the crowded street, surveying the crowds on the plank sidewalks on both sides with impassive, all seeing eyes. Boom oil towns were no new sight to him but somehow they were always interesting. There is probably nothing else in all the world now like them. The old, goldrush towns, the swarming, wild towns of the railroad building days, the tumultuous cowtowns of the trail-driving epoch; these were the closest counterparts of the boom oil towns. And the boom oil towns, in many ways, surpassed them all.

Swarming crowds on the sidewalks, oil workers in stained khakis, laced boots, battered hats, drillers, tool dressers, pipeliners or "cats" as the oilfield calls such workers with no hint of derision, tankbuilders, pumpers, gaugers, roustabouts, here and there the higher officials, tool pushers, farm bosses, superintendents, geologists or "rock hounds" as the oilfields say, all the types of the working fields. And with them, mingling on the sidewalk the other types attracted by every big oil boom, good, indifferent and just plain scum, merchants, mechanics, eating house men, dance hall operators, grifters, boosters, dice hounds, bootleggers, dope peddlers, hijackers, the reputable merchant rubbing shoulders with the scum of the

earth, the sweepings and scourings of humanity.

Some of the buildings were black with oil. Bedford noted that as he passed. That meant that there were wells right in town, among the buildings; that they had come in and sprayed crude oil all over everything for a hundred yards or more in every direction. Only the very newest buildings were still clean and white. There was the thick, pungent smell of sulphur oil in the air, the smell of the notorious, much feared, "rotten" gas, the poison gas found in a number of West Texas oil areas and which has killed a number of men as well as countless domestic and wild animals and birds. Bedford remembered seeing a dozen giant mules once, hitched to a rack to leeward of a well making rotten gas, all dead.

A giant dancehall of unpainted boards garish with lights, was doing a land office business while an orchestra inside hammered out savage, moaning jazz. Every other place seemed to be either a cafe or a drugstore and while some of the latter undoubtedly were legitimate, others, Bedford knew, must be simply barrelhouses—saloons, that is, in the language of the uninitiate.

He nosed his car in against the sidewalk in front of a square, two story, unpainted frame building with an illuminated sign, PATRICK COUNTY COURT HOUSE over its main entrance. To the left was another door with a swinging sign outside, SHERIFF'S OFFICE and this door was open, letting out a flood of yellow light.

Shoving his Stetson back from his forehead, Jim Bedford climbed wearily out and strode across, into the lighted door.

CHAPTER II

MISTER ORTEGA

A BLACK browed, black headed man, sitting at a desk, looked casually up as Jim Bedford came in. He stared at Bedford, ignoring his nod. Bedford noted the deputy's star pinned on his unbuttoned vest, the two ivory handled guns at the fellow's belt, the fancy boots. A faint flicker of amusement, instantly gone, passed over Bedford's gray eyes. Real two gun men, gents who wore two guns and could really use them, were rare as frying chickens with wisdom teeth. But there seemed to be any number of gents who wore two guns.

"Yeah? Whatta you want?" The black haired man's voice was an ungracious snarl.

Jim Bedford looked at him. "You carry both them guns loaded?" he asked, his voice very innocent.

The black haired deputy started angrily, whirled around; "Say, wise guy, mebbe you think——"

"Yeah, sometimes," agreed Bedford softly. "Right hard work though, ain't it? Where's Sheriff Henderson?"

The black haired man glared at him, opened his mouth to say something, apparently changed his mind. "He ain't in," he said sullenly. "I'm his chief deputy; I'll handle yore business."

"Sorta private matter with the sheriff," dissented Bedford softly. "Reckon I better see him personal. When will he be in?"

The deputy's eyes narrowed. "What's it to you?" He caught the look in Bedford's mild, gray eyes. "He'll be in in about a hour," he added, suddenly more affable. "Want to wait, Mister—Mister ——"

"Reckon I'll mosey around some," drawled Bedford, ignoring the question in the deputy's unfinished sentence and on his face. "I'll drop back in about an hour." He turned, heading out the door again.

"Say!" protested the deputy. "Say you——" Ignoring him, Bedford walked calmly on out, leaving the black haired officer glaring after him angrily.

With a sudden, surprised whistle Bedford spun on his toes, leaped like a cat, ten feet toward his car.

"Why, you——" He made a headlong, diving plunge, his great fists swinging. He had not been out of his car two minutes. But in the seat, behind the wheel and fumbling at the switch was a man, obviously trying desperately to start the machine and drive it off.

With a frightened gasp the shadowy car rustler tried to throw himself over the other side of the car, to make his getaway. One of Jim Bedford's great fists connected with the fellow's head, a terrific smack, knocking him head over heels. He lit with a thud in the dust, flipped over like an acrobat turning a handspring and was gone, a flying shadow, melting into the darkness, leav-

ing Bedford sprawling over the steering wheel, staring after him.

Grinning ruefully, the big man put his bruised knuckles to his lips. "Trying to swipe my car!" he exclaimed softly, reproachfully. "Yeah, I sure must be in a boom town!"

He settled down behind the wheel, twisting about to make sure that his rifle was still in its scabbard. It was. Evidently the enterprising hot car artist had been after the whole hog or nothing. Starting the motor, Jim Bedford backed out into the street. It would, he judged, be a good idea to put this car with its contents in a garage or something.

A hundred yards on down the street from the court house he found the place, a parking yard, lighted with a couple of big gasoline floodlamps, in charge of an individual with a face that looked remarkably like that of a pit bulldog. Bedford drove his car into the yard.

"Anybody ever try to swipe stuff out of cars in here?" Bedford asked lazily, handing the man a quarter.

The bulldog looking gentleman wrinkled his broken nose. "One guy," he said economically. "He got hurt. Here's yore ticket."

GRINNING, Bedford strolled out of the yard, back up the street again, letting himself be carried along by the crowd.

The fourth eating house he passed looked cleaner than the others and he turned in the door, seating himself on a rough stool before the board counter, critically studying the menu card, painted in inch high letters on the back wall. The place was crowded and the waiters, all men, were working under high pressure. Bedford chose roast pork.

The waiter brought his order, four huge slices of roast pork, two huge sweet potatoes and a cup of coffee, the cup having the general dimensions of a bird bath and evidently made out of much the same kind of concrete. That was all, and the check was just fifty cents. Simple fare but well cooked, enough of it, cheap and it stuck to your ribs. It is an odd fact that you can generally get more rough but substantial food for your money in a boom oil town than you can even in the big cities.

Bedford ate leisurely, listening to the conversation. The diners were evidently oil workers for the most part and they were close mouthed. Their talk was almost entirely generalities, the weather and such topics, and they appeared to be very largely strangers to one another. Which was nothing novel in an oil town, Bedford noted silently. Men from everywhere came drifting into the mushroom towns of oil. It was not good etiquette to ask a man where he was from; worse manners yet to inquire what his name had been back where he came from.

Finishing his meal and paying the hard faced cashier, Bedford helped himself to a toothpick and started to stroll out. He looked at his watch. He still had nearly thirty minutes before time to go back and see if the sheriff had come in yet.

There was a startling scream of rage, high pitched, bloodcurdling, followed instantly by the heavy crash of a revolver, another scream, the stabbing thunder of a number of weapons blazing away at top speed. The crowded sidewalk outside was abruptly the scene of a wild panic, men cursing, shouting, plunging this way and that, striving madly to get out of the way. A bullet buried itself in the pine sill of the door, to the right of Jim Bedford's foot, kicking up a splinter that snapped him on the ankle like a snapping rubber band and in one automatic movement he had flung himself back and to one side and had jerked his right hand under his coat toward the big gun nestling in his left armpit.

A man pitched across the doorway, his body twisting, rolling on the plank sidewalk, his right hand and arm, the hand gripping an ugly automatic, falling across the doorsill half into the restaurant. A black hole was in his forehead and two more were in the left breast of his oil stained, khaki shirt. Bedford's sweeping, gray eyes took in these details in a glance. The fellow was a big man and he most certainly was dead, shot in the head and in the heart as well. Somebody, a dark shadow, whipped across the sidewalk, past the door, turning and firing back as he went, without a pause in his headlong

flight. And then abruptly the firing had ceased.

STANDING slightly to the left of the door, just inside the restaurant, Bedford stared with narrowing eyes at the body in the doorway then turned his head to drawl a question at the hardfaced cashier just behind him. Again came that startling, high pitched scream from outside, a raging, blood freezing scream, like that of a maddened panther.

Jim Bedford's head started to snap around toward the door again. He heard the occupants of the room gasp sharply. His gray eyes whipped around to the doorway. His teeth clicked shut and he stepped back, not a frightened retreat but the instant precaution of a gunman, giving himself enough room.

Framed in the doorway, standing just back of the body of the dead man was another man, a giant, crouching, a black gun in each hand. He was hatless, blackheaded, the skin on his face was as brown as that of a Mexican and his eyes, evidently bloodshot, looked like smoking peepholes through which one gazed into a flaming, raging hell. He was dressed in an expensive business suit, the vest unbuttoned, displaying a creamy white, soft silk shirt and his trousers were tucked into embroidered cowboy boots whose cost was obvious at the first glance. He had a nose like the beak of some fierce bird of prey and on his upper lip was a thin mustache, intensely black, drooping and evidently carefully waxed.

He opened his mouth again, screaming like a panther. The black muzzles of his guns swung in jerking arcs, covering the room. He shouted, his voice high pitched, a deadly, raging whine. "Any more of you sons of bucks in here? Any more? Come on, you damn —Say you!" He had swung, was looking straight at Bedford.

"Don't know you, fella," said Bedford softly. "You lost somethin'?" He was very close to death and he knew it. The gunman in the doorway had every appearance of being a madman and his two guns were trained straight at Bedford's face.

The gunman's red eyes blinked. He straightened suddenly, his giant figure filling the doorway. Stepping over the body, he came into the room. "I don't know you either, guy," he said, his whining voice now so low it was almost a whisper. "Don't know you and don't like you—see! Who are you?"

Jim Bedford stepped back one more step and the index finger of his right hand, under the left breast of his coat touched the butt of his gun. His gray eyes, cold, calculating, were fixed on the giant's reddened ones, watching like a hawk for that flicker which would indicate the big killer was going to shoot. "What's it to you, fella?" he asked quietly.

The hardfaced restaurant cashier, standing behind Bedford, flung himself forward. "Wait a minute, Mister Ortega, wait a minute!" he pleaded. "This guy ain't done nothin', he was in here eatin', he don't know nothin' about it! Ask anybody here!"

The giant's red eyes blinked again, shifted from Bedford to the cashier. Casually Jim Bedford took a step to the left and as he did so his fingers closed over the butt of his gun, nestling in its spring clip holster under his coat. One jerk and the gun would be in action now, the skeleton build of the holster insured that. And he had stepped sideways out of the direct line of aim of the killer's guns. He took another slow step sideways.

"I'm tellin' you, he was settin' quiet right in here!" The cashier's voice was a wail. With a snarl the giant jerked up his right gun and started to swing toward Jim Bedford. Bedford's taut fingers gave a lightning twist to the butt of his own gun—and then instantly came interruption. Three big men plunged in the door.

THE foremost was the black haired deputy sheriff.

"What the hell's goin' on here?" he demanded loudly. "What the hell? Oh, you, Mister Ortega? What is it, this guy try to shoot you in the back. Take your paw off that gun, *you!*" the last order addressed loudly to Jim Bedford.

A little spark snapped across Bedford's gray eyes. "Yeah? And who's tellin' me to? *You?*"

"Why, you——" began the deputy furiously.

A leathery, gnarled hand fell on his shoulder. "Shut up, Buck," commanded a hard voice at his back. "Ortega, put

them guns up. And you, why Jim Be—" Bedford shook his head quickly, a faint, guarded warning and the old sheriff who had followed his deputy instantly interrupted himself. "You stand easy too, fella. Now then, what about this?"

The giant killer for an instant had seemed on the point of flat refusal. Then, slowly he slid his weapons back into carved holsters, out of sight under his coat. "Clarkson killers again, Sheriff," he snapped harshly. "Tried to kill me. I think this sibiny's one of 'em." He gave Bedford an ugly look.

"I'll take care of him," snapped the old sheriff. "What I wantta know Ortega is, what happened? Who killed this guy?" His faded, blue eyes indicated the dead man in the door.

Ortega straightened and the red glare seemed to go out of his eyes as suddenly as though dark curtains had been closed together just inside. Watching him, Jim Bedford noted for the first time his thick, cruel lips. Despite his name this man was no Mexican, Bedford decided that immediately. Bedford did not know what he was, except—and this was obvious—whatever breed Rand Ortega was, it was a bad breed.

Ortega spoke slowly, his voice curiously impassive. "They tried to get me. I got this one," he indicated the body in the door with a contemptuous jerk of his head. "Others got away. That's all." He looked at the sheriff, a veiled contempt in his eyes, or so the watching Bedford thought; and then, insolently, without another word he turned and started out the doorway.

And the sheriff let him go, without a word! Jim Bedford just checked a surprised whistle. "C'mon, you," said the sheriff hurriedly, turning toward him. "Buck, you take care of this here body. The rest of you guys—that'll be all, scatter out, yuh hear!" He laid a gnarled hand on Bedford's shoulder.

Passively Jim Bedford let himself be towed out of the room, along the plank sidewalk, jammed more than ever now with excited men, on to the sheriff's office. Without a word Sheriff Henderson wormed out of the crowd, his hand still gripping his companion's arm and turned to go into the courthouse. And just at that moment Jim Bedford's eye fell upon a passing car in the stream of traffic. With a mighty jerk he tore free, whirled and stared.

"What is it? What is it, Bedford?" The sheriff's voice was querulous. "Aw, it's all over. C'mon!"

Jim Bedford had leaped to the edge of the sidewalk, staring down into the dust of the street, raising his head quickly and trying to find the car which had just passed. It had lost itself in the swarm of traffic farther up the street. He turned back reluctantly.

"All right. I'm comin'. Thought I saw somebody I knew."

He followed the sheriff into the building. "Yeah, and I did see somebody," he muttered under his breath. "That was that rifle shootin' hombre, I bet a cookie. Wish I could of got a better look at him."

THE passing car, as Bedford's casual glance had fallen on it, had been sliding through a glare of light from the headlamps of another car. In the glare Bedford had seen a tall, dirty white Stetson on the driver's head, had gotten a quick, quartering glimpse of a dark, hook-nosed face. And just as he had looked he had seen a tiny wink of light, like a firefly opening and closing on the side of the sugarloaf crown of the hat. Then, immediately Jim had seen the black, round hole. The lights of that incoming machine had winked through a double bullet hole in the crown of that hat and the print of the tires in the dust, when Bedford had leaped to look before the following cars obliterated them, he believed had been exactly the same as the prints in the sand where that unknown rifleman had come down the ridge to climb into his car.

Not very definite evidence. The brand of tires using that particular cross barred tread was a popular one, certainly there were lots of hats with holes in them, bullet holes or otherwise, and the glimpse Bedford had gotten of the fellow's face had been all too brief and blurred. It was a hunch, more than anything else, but somehow Jim had a feeling that that was the rifleman and that he would recognize that hook-nosed face if he saw it again.

Sheriff Henderson led the way straight into his private office, on inside, beyond the room where Bedford had met the black haired deputy, Buck Farrell. Motioning Bedford to a chair, the old sheriff turned, locked the door

carefully, pulled down the shades on the two windows and sat heavily down in the aged swivel chair before the scarred desk. He swung around and his face seemed suddenly very old and tired.

"Ranger," he said wearily. "I'm glad you're here. I been a livin' in hell. I'm gonna ask you to do a job which, before yuh get through, prob'ly will get me killed or put in the penitentiary. I don't care, I'd just as soon be dead or put away as go on like these here last few weeks!"

Chapter III

"I'm Just a Dang Crook!"

JIM BEDFORD leaned back in his chair, slowly extracting a short, blackened pipe and a tobacco pouch from his pockets, filling the pipe bowl, lighting it carefully. He blew out the match, broke it, exhaled a long, coiling puff of gray smoke. "How'd you know me, Henderson?" he asked quietly.

"I've seen yore picture in the papers. Adjutant General up at Austin described you to me also. He said these here guys wasn't liable to know yuh and what's more he said you was simply hell in a basket when it come to handlin' cases like this. I didn't tell him that ——," the sheriff broke off, his face twisting.

"Yeah?" encouraged Bedford softly.

The sheriff looked up. "Did—did he tell you anything? No? Well"—he broke off again. "My Gawd, Bedford, I wish to hell there hadn't never been no oil discovered anywhere in West Texas!" His gnarled hands were clenched together. "Oil! Looks like it drives folks loco, so they don't think nothin' about lyin', robbin', murderin' folks—anything! Somebody punches a hole in the ground and up comes a roarin', screamin' black cloud of oil and everybody goes mad. Look at this here county! Year ago we was peaceful, hadn't a man in the penitentiary, hadn't sent nobody up from Patrick County in twenty year. Then the Magnus hits oil and today——" he spread out his hands.

Bedford nodded. "Yeah," he drawled. "You said somethin' about a bad case?"

The old sheriff seemed to pull himself together. "Yes, I did. Pull yore chair closer. I'm gittin' so I think they listen in on me, right here in my own office. I think they moved the county seat over here just so's they could watch me. It was a crooked deal, movin' the county seat over here, you know that?"

Jim Bedford nodded again. "You said something about a case," he repeated patiently.

The sheriff clenched his hands. "Yeah. Listen, I'm crooked, you hear? I been lettin' a man go loose that I know has done a number of killin's. And more, I been lettin' him run practically open saloons, a fancy house and a gamblin' parlor right here in Death Creek, right under my nose. I wanta git that off my chest first. I'm layin' all my cards down face up, see, tellin' you I'm just a dang crook, too, but a crook that wants to cash in clean!"

Jim Bedford's gray eyes narrowed slightly. "Sheriff," he asked quietly, "what hold has this Ortega got on you?"

The old sheriff started violently. "You —you know? Know about him and, and —say, how come yuh know!"

"I don't know." Bedford shook his head easily. "Just guessed. Go on, start at the first."

SHERIFF HENDERSON drew a long breath.

"It's a mess," he said slowly. "You ain't gonna make heads or tails of what I tell yuh, maybe, it's just such a mess. But here it is. Yuh know about Brazos Packard and the Gregories?"

Jim Bedford shook his head. "I know old Brazos Packard owned the Death Creek ranch that's got about half this oilfield on it," he informed. "Packard died about two, three years ago, didn't he, and his estate's been tied up ever since. That right?"

"Yeah, that's right," the sheriff agreed. "Only the estate ain't really tied up like yuh think. Old Chick Gregory, the hombre what owns the G Bar P ranch just north of Packard's Death Creek property, well he's the administrator of old Brazos Packard's will.

"Here's what happened. To begin with, back in the Nineties Brazos Packard and Chick Gregory was partners. That's where that G Bar P brand come from, savvy? Well, they had a fallin' out and split up the partnership and Chick Gregory took half the ranch and the brand while Packard took the other half.

"But in spite of the fact that the two old fellers didn't like each other very much, why young Dan Packard, Brazos' adopted son, and young Ben Gregory, Chick Gregory's oldest boy, gits to be great friends. Then through them kids the two old fellers did practically make up their fuss and got to be friends again.

"Things rocked along until about four years ago. And hell busted loose! Young Dan Packard and his pardner, Ben Gregory, was accused of holdin' up a post office and killin' the postmaster, and they couldn't furnish no real alibi. They got scared, I reckon. Anyway one night they busted outa jail and run off. They just dropped clean outa sight."

The sheriff's faded eyes were seeing other days. He caught himself guiltily and went on. "Old Chick Gregory's a hard man. He hadn't believed the boys were guilty, but when they run away he changed his mind and said if they hadn't been guilty they wouldn't of fled. He took it hard and said that a son of his who was a thief and a murderer wasn't his own son no more and if Ben Gregory ever come back, why he'd deliver him to the law with his own hands.

"Old Brazos Packard was different. He stood up for the boys, said Dan was still his boy, no matter what Dan had went and done, and that Ben was his friend too. So old Packard and old Gregory had another fallin' out, a quarrel that pretty near ended in a gunfight. Old Brazos rode off home finally, still standin' up for them boys. And he spent the rest of his life tryin' to find them —and couldn't.

"Well, two year ago Brazos Packard died. On his death bed the old man called Chick Gregory in and they talked together alone for a long time. I don't know what they said but I do know they made up. In his will old Brazos made Chick Gregory his executor and he left half his property to Dan Packard and half to Ben Gregory or, if either of them was dead without heirs, why the other got it all. If both was dead, why Chick Gregory and his heirs git the property; but Chick was to search 'til he found out what had become of them boys. If he found them, he was to bring 'em back if he could and the Packard money was to help 'em fight their case."

JIM BEDFORD'S eyebrows lifted. "Packard trusted Gregory to do that?" he asked.

"Yeah," the sheriff nodded vigorously. "But wait a minute. Chick did start searchin'. Meantime he got a chance and leased the Packard ranch to the Magnus Petroleum Company and they drilled a wildcat test on it, right down there on the creek bank, and hit oil! And today the Packard estate is worth fifteen or twenty million, maybe more! But wait! Listen!

"Just six months ago a crook got shot in a holdup and while he was dyin', he confessed to this post office holdup that young Dan Packard and Ben Gregory was accused of. He cleared the boys, see? And maybe you think that didn't hit old Chick Gregory hard! He went out to old Brazos' grave and got down on his knees and apologized to old Brazos; said he'd never touch that money hisself, that he'd spend the rest of his life searchin'. And he is searchin', doin' everything he knows."

The old sheriff paused. Bedford leaned forward. "What's all this got to do with Ortega?" he demanded. "What's it got to do with you?"

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute. Somebody is murderin' the Gregories! Two weeks ago one of Chick's sons was found, layin' in Death Creek shot in the back. Four days ago Joe Gregory, old Chick's last remainin' son, was shot to death right here in Death Creek. A week ago somebody tried to dry gulch Chick hisself. Day before yesterday they tried it again and killed his horse."

Bedford stared. "You think it's Ortega? Why?"

The sheriff's gnarled hands were strained together. "I think it may be Ortega, but I'm tied hand and foot and I can't do nothin' to stop it! I think somebody's murderin' the Gregories because of some kind of plot to git that twenty millions. I'm hamstrung, you understand? You got to stop this!"

The Ranger's gray eyes narrowed. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Why can't you do anything?"

The old sheriff spread his hands, choked as he tried to speak. "Ranger," he said brokenly, "Rand Ortega owns me body and soul. He's got somethin' on me. I been takin' his dirty graft money, keepin' my eyes shut, doin' just

what he said. But, by God, when it comes to standin' by and seein' honest folks shot in the back, seein' my friends murdered, I can't stand it no longer! I'm gonna tell you everything! I"—the sheriff paused abruptly. "Will yuh promise not to use this again' me 'til this Packard case is solved? Then—hell I don't care then! I don't care!"

Bedford's eyes were puzzled. "You'll incriminate yourself?"

"Yes I will! Old Brazos was my best friend! Chick Gregory's my friend. I won't double cross them even to save my own skin! Listen—here's what Ortega's got on me. I— killed a man in Kentucky, near forty years ago. They sent me up to the penitentiary for life. And I got away."

The Ranger stared. "You're an escaped lifer?"

"I am! For thirty-four years I been tryin' to go straight out here. I—why I even got to be sheriff! And then along comes Rand Ortega, says if I don't do what he says he'll have me sent back to the penitentiary! And he can, too!"

BEDFORD tried to speak. The old sheriff hurried on.

"Listen, Bedford! They told me to keep my damn nose outa this. That blackheaded guy that tried to make you take yore hand off yore gun—Buck Farrell, my deputy—why Ortega owns him! He's a damn spy on me, savvy? The minute I start to do anything they tell me not to, why they send me back to Kentucky and Buck, he's the new sheriff! You see?"

The Ranger nodded curtly. "One thing," he interposed. "Who is Clarkson? This Ortega gent said something about it bein' Clarkson killers he was scrappin' with tonight."

"Diamond Clarkson? I don't know who he is!" admitted the sheriff helplessly. "Ortega says he's an outlaw enemy of his and Ortega also said it was Clarkson gorillas killin' the Gregories."

Bedford smiled dryly. "And Ortega tells you to lay off, huh? Why? You told me you think Ortega's the man killing the Gregory tribe. Then you say that Diamond Clarkson and Ortega are fighting and Ortega says Clarkson is killing the Gregories but Ortega won't let you go after him! That's crazy! Why would either Ortega or Clarkson want to rub out the Gregories?"

The sheriff shrugged helplessly. "I know it's crazy! Hell, I don't know why. Maybe Ortega's a relative of Chick Gregory's, though Chick says he ain't. Maybe Ortega's related to either Dan Packard or Ben Gregory by marriage. They might 'a' got married, yuh know. Maybe Ortega's got Dan or Ben alive. Maybe it ain't any of that. Maybe Diamond Clarkson is the killer. Maybe—why there's a thousand different maybes, Bedford!"

Jim Bedford nodded, smiling grimly. "Looks like it," he agreed softly. "One other thing, Sheriff. You tell anybody I was coming?"

Sheriff Henderson shook his head. "Not a livin' soul."

"Then why would a guy with a hook nose and a big, white, Carlsbad Stetson try to shoot me, down in Dry Fork Crossing? You know about thirty miles south of here? He held me up for half an hour or so."

The sheriff's leathery face went suddenly white. "Dry Fork Crossin'? Oh, my God! Did they——"

"What?"

"Old Chick Gregory was out there just south of where the road comes over that big bridge. He was out there on a piece of land he owns, drillin' a little oil test, just him and a couple of drillers!"

Ranger Jim Bedford knocked the ash from his pipe, put it away. He stood up quickly. "Sheriff," he said and the slow drawl was gone from his voice. "You got any men you can depend on?"

"Yeah," answered the sheriff. "I got a friend who likes to help me out when there's anything doing. His name's Frank Stilwell."

"All right," snapped the Ranger. "Get this Stilwell then and go out there and see if something has happened to Chick Gregory. If Gregory's all right, have him come in with you so I can talk to him. Don't need to tell anybody else who I am. I'll meet you here."

The old sheriff was getting obediently to his feet. "And—and what are you gonna be doin'?" he demanded slowly.

"Me?" A mirthless tiny smile was in Jim Bedford's gray eyes. "I'm gonna look around and see if I can't find me a hook nosed gent in this town with a bullet hole through his bonnet. Maybe he can tell me just why he busted my windshield with a hunk of hot lead!"

CHAPTER IV

KIDNAPPER!

THE Black Bonanza, a huge, flimsy building built of rough boards and tarpaper, two stories high and blazing with lights, was diagonally across the street from the restaurant in which Bedford had had his encounter with the giant, Ortega. The Bonanza was quite plainly the amusement center of the boom town and as Bedford approached it, moving slowly along the plank sidewalk, staying as much as possible in the shadow and keeping his eyes keenly open, he could hear the sounds of wild merriment within.

It was somewhere between ten and eleven o'clock and the tempo of the town, Bedford noted, had subtly changed. There were fewer cars actually moving along the street and only a bare few of the giant, loaded trucks, but the parked cars were far more numerous. Against both curbs and in the center of the street in a double row cars were parked, fender to fender, so that only two narrow lanes for traffic remained, one way lanes, one on each side of the center parked machines.

The sidewalks were, if anything, more crowded but the crowd was not moving as briskly as it had been. Men were standing in clustered masses here and there and the women were no longer in evidence on the streets.

Some of the stores were dark, others still brilliantly lighted. The stench of bootleg liquor was plain in the air as Bedford passed one "drugstore." Ten steps from the corner of the Black Bonanza he paused an instant, studying the place before proceeding farther.

The name, BLACK BONANZA DANCE PALACE was painted clear across the front, illuminated by brilliant lights. And the whole front portion of the building, with the exception of a wide hallway to the right, was a dance floor. The windows were open but barred with heavy wire, showing the crowded, swaying dancers within. And an unseen orchestra, somewhere within, was contributing riotous music, aided every now and then by the wild whooping of drunken dancers.

Pulling his hat lower, Bedford stepped into the hallway, pushing his way through the crowd. He caught a snatch of conversation as he passed a group of oil workers—"yeah, and Ortega, he was standing right there in the door. Them Clarkson gorillas was across the street. They started shootin' first and"— The rest was lost.

BEDFORD pushed on, quietly watching the faces. It was a hunch more than anything else that he would find the rifle shooting gent in this place and, after finding him, would learn something of value, but it was a strong hunch and he was playing it.

He eddied with the crowd through a side door and into the great dance-hall. There was a waist high railing separating the dancers from the onlookers around the walls but on each side of the room was a ticket box, beside a gate in the railings. TEN CENTS A DANCE said the signs over the ticket boxes. Inside the railings were benches on which waited what few of the daringly dressed, hard faced but very young girl "hostesses" were not dancing. The dancing girls, taking a ticket for each dance from their male partners, were thrusting the tickets into their stockings and many of the better looking girls already had their hosiery so crammed that they looked as though the wearers might be suffering from dropsy or elephantiasis.

Bedford drifted against the railing.

"Come on, big boy! Come dance with baby!" A girl on the other side of the railing turned to smile at him with scarlet lips.

Bedford shook his head. "Sorry, sister. Don't know how."

"Hell," said the girl dispassionately. "Neither does any of the rest of these dumb bunnies. C'mon! Well, don't then!"

The Ranger's sharp eyes were examining the place minutely, passing guardedly from face to face—and it looked like there must be several hundred packed into the big room. A heavy swarm were on the opposite side of the dance floor, against what evidently was a soda fountain, which probably was selling a number of other things in addition to soft drinks.

Turning casually, Bedford started toward that bar. The crowd behind the railings was thick at places and it took time to work his way through, but his

hunch was growing stronger every minute and with it he was feeling another hunch, a vague, growing sense of something about to break. "Watch your step, fella," he told himself silently. "When you feel that way. *Oh, oh!*"

At a doorway to the left of the soda fountain bar the hook nosed, swarthy face of the man he had seen in the car, the man with the bullet pierced sombrero, had appeared suddenly, out of the hallway. The man was hatless now. But there was no mistaking that hooked nose. It was the man.

Bedford's left hand gripped the lapel of his coat, holding it slightly away from his chest so that, if necessary, his right hand would have an unimpeded path to the gun under his left arm. He began to slide through the crowd like an eel, working toward his man, standing in that doorway, idly watching the dancers.

He was right beside him. The man turned. Was there a sudden startled gleam of recognition in his eyes? If so it was instantly gone, he turned his face to the dancefloor again, a marvelous act of keeping a straight face, if acting it was.

"Fella," said Bedford softly. "Step out in the hall here. I wanta talk to you."

The hook nosed man looked at him. "'Yeah? What for?" His eyes were hostile, veiled. Bedford stepped still closer, glancing into the hallway, noting that there was a clear path to an open window, across the hall, the window opening probably into a side area leading to the back of the building.

"I've got somethin' I wanta talk to you about," he said quietly. "Come on."

The hook nosed man jerked back. "Say, you! Keep your damn hands"—his angry voice cut off abruptly as he caught the look in Bedford's gray eyes and his thick hands jerked down an inch toward his belt.

"Don't yuh!" warned the Ranger softly. "I can see yuh now. What I wanted to ask you was, why did you shoot at me?"

THE last words came with the snap of a whiplash. The hook nosed man's face twitched in astonishment, he leaped back and his voice was a screaming yell. "Clarkson killer, guys! Clarkson—! Git him!" He was back through the doorway, Bedford diving headlong after him, like a football player trying for a flying tackle.

The hook-nosed man eluded his straining hands, whipped back, and his right hand went out of sight under his coat, started to lash forward. Jim Bedford's great, right hand moved like a piece of highspeed machinery, a blur of motion. There was a flash of blued steel, a spurt of flame, the barking roar of a big revolver, thunderous in the hallway. The hook nosed man screamed in agony, snatched at his wrist with his left hand as his automatic pistol went spinning to thud down to the floor. In a plunge Bedford was on him, slugging with the butt of his big gun.

There was the smashing roar of a pistol in the hallway to Bedford's right, the scream of a ricocheting bullet. Another shot, another, a wild chaos of screams, shouts and curses in the dancehall behind, in the hallway, a man running down the stairs at the end of the hall to the left, shooting as he came.

Spinning on his heel, holding the unconscious figure of the hook nosed gunman in his left arm, Bedford fired at the feet of the man descending the steps, saw the splinters fly and the gunman leap back. Bedford whirled around, firing twice more, into the floor but the crashing boom of the big shells was all that was necessary. He swung the unconscious gunman up as though he were a light sack, reached the window in a flying stride and was through it, running down a black areaway, toward the alley in rear of the big building. Behind him in the dancehall he was leaving what sounded like a full sized riot, men shouting, women screaming, and, seemingly, not more than one or two of them with any idea at all what it was all about.

Jim plunged past the corner of the building, running, veering to the right sharply. There was a littered alley in the rear of the row of structures lining the main street but on the other side of the alley was nothing but brush, a tent here and there, a hasty shack or so, piles of abandoned rubbish, cans, old oil well casing, stripped automobiles, what not. And right beyond them was the oilfield itself, the bright lights of wells here and there in the darkness, wells from a hundred and fifty to three

hundred yards apart. To one side and on a little rise were some monstrous tanks, fifty-five thousand barrel monsters, and here and there in the night were other tanks, much smaller, separators, gas flares. There were a score or more of these flares, great, waving plumes of flame casting a bloody glow into the night, burning the waste, poison gas of the field.

Dodging around a vast pile of empty cans and rubbish, Bedford ran with his burden straight out into the brush, twisting between the scrubby, thorny trees, losing himself. He sprinted. And behind him he heard the first sounds of a chase, men shouting, feet pounding, but the pursuers evidently were turning and running up and down the alley, believing that he had dodged back among the buildings.

BEDFORD grinned at that, slowed his pace, trotting on, burying himself in the brush, avoiding the lighted wells. The man on his shoulder began to squirm vaguely. He tapped him on the head again with the butt of his Colt, quieting him, and trotted on.

He was still veering to the right. Eventually and perhaps a full half mile from the town, he came to the creek itself, Death Creek, its bitter, poisonous waters looking like crystal in the gleam from a gas flare.

Here, in the deep shadow of a jutting rock and a stunted greasewood bush, Bedford stopped, laying his captive down, dipping up water in his hat and dashing it over the hook nosed face. The hook nosed one spluttered, tried to sit up, got more water in the face and this time weaved up to a sitting position, still groggy but astonishingly vocal about his indignation.

A hard, revolver muzzle jabbed against his nose. "Suppose you shut up," Bedford suggested. "If you don't —" The gun muzzle jabbed again. The hook nosed gunman hushed abruptly.

"What's yore name?" The Ranger's voice was very soft but there was no mistaking the threat in it.

"What's it to you?" Hook Nose snarled truculently. The revolver muzzle jabbed sharply. "Roy Clegg."

"That's better." Jim Bedford drew back. Then, like a whiplash. "What'd you shoot at me for? Answer me or I'll——"

"Say! I wasn't out there, I——I don't know what yo're talkin' about, bozo! I don't know what yo're talkin' about! Say, who are you, anyway, huh?"

Jim Bedford was on his knees, glaring down at his prisoner. "Yeah?" he snapped. "Don't know a thing, huh? Then why did yuh say you wasn't 'out there' when I talked about a shootin'. Don't know a thing, do you?"

"I tell yuh I don't know nothin'!" The prisoner was raving. "I don't know what yo're talkin' about! Listen, you, guy, I been right here in Death Creek all day and night! I can prove it, you hear! You got the wrong guy! Who the hell are you, anyway?"

Bedford got to his feet, turning quickly to look back toward the boom town. Search parties were evidently spreading out into the brush now, shouting noisily to each other. Bedford grinned faintly.

"Aw shut up, fella," he interrupted the still raving prisoner. "You've said enough. You can tell the rest to a jury!"

The man at his feet hushed suddenly, stared upward. "Oh, oh!" he gasped sharply. "I know where I've seen you now! Yo're a damn vinegaroon—a Texas Ranger! Yo're a——" without a warning he tried furiously to leap to his feet and run, shouting wildly as he did so. "Help, help! Here boys, here I—— Kill him!"

Not even moving from his tracks, Jim Bedford struck with his revolver butt, up, down, landing with a thud on the prisoner's head, just enough to send him back to dreamland once more. Then, in leisurely but thorough fashion the Ranger proceeded to bind his man, using the gangster's own belt and necktie in the process. He dashed more of the bitter water into the gunman's face, reviving him, and then as the fellow opened his mouth to yell, popped into it a gag made of the gunman's own shirt tail, lashing it fast.

Grinning, Jim Bedford stepped back. The searching parties were working closer, shouting and cursing as they pried about. With a jerk Bedford hoisted the bound man to his feet.

"Now listen, guy," the Ranger's voice was very soft, drawling. "We're goin' back to town, to the very last place

your gang will think to look for you. We'll just slip around and through this outfit lookin' for you, savvy? Should you be entertaining any idea of not cooperatin' on this here idea, why likely you're goin' in sorta dead. You understand?"

The prisoner made an inarticulate noise. Stepping behind him and starting to chivvy him onward, Jim Bedford grinned mildly. The sheriff's office in the courthouse probably would be the last imaginable place Ortega's men would go seeking for a "kidnapped" comrade.

Chapter V

DOUBLE-CROSSED

IT WAS close to four o'clock in the morning. The boom town of Death Creek was as quiet as it ever got at any hour of the day or night. There were still a few men on the street, still some trucks and cars moving. The wells in the field were active—work never ceases in a boom oilfield. But Death Creek Town was almost quiet.

A car stopped in front of the frame court house, where the light over the door of the sheriff's office still burned. The old sheriff, Jeff Henderson, and another man got out. In the light from the bulb over the door the sheriff's face looked ten years older. He strode impatiently toward his office, noticing that the door was closed, the rooms inside dark. But just as he was fumbling for his keys the door opened.

"Come in, Sheriff," commanded a soft, drawling voice. "Been waitin' for you." The lights inside snapped suddenly on and in the doorway Sheriff Henderson saw the tall form of Jim Bedford.

The sheriff looked up and it seemed to the Ranger that there was an odd, almost a crazed glitter in the man's faded eyes. "Bedford," he said, in a low, harsh voice. "Bedford, Chick Gregory is dead. They got him."

Bedford stepped back. "Come in," he invited. "Shut the door. I got one of your men back here in your office tied up with that Buck deputy of yours for company—and I sorta been waitin' for you."

He closed the door, glancing keenly at the second man who had followed him in. "Frank Stilwell," said the sheriff dully. "He's all right, Bedford. This here's Jim Bedford, a Texas Ranger, Frank."

They nodded to each other, gripped hands. Bedford turned. "Well?"

The sheriff was staring into space. He swung around. "Ranger, they got Chick Gregory. You know where you come through the gap in the ridge after comin' through Dry Fork? Where you said you got shot at? Well, Gregory's little well was just south of there; you couldn't see it for a little ridge, but it was just two hundred yards from the road. It looked like old Chick and Buster Matthews, his driller, must 'a' put up a hell of a fight, stood 'em off for some time; but they was both dead, shot plumb full of holes."

The sheriff's harsh, low voice stopped. He was twisting his big hat in his hands and there was a hard, icy glitter in his faded, blue eyes. "Well, they stopped you prob'ly because if you'd 'a' come on you could 'a' heard the firin'," he went on with an effort. "They had a man away up on that ridge savvy, where he could see the road both ways and likewise see the well back down behind him. Sort of a lookout, you understand. He seen you comin' and put a bullet through yore windshield, so's you wouldn't come on over the ridge, hear the shootin' and investigate, see? And whilst you and him was swappin' bullets the rest of his damn gang was finishin' Chick and Buster. Old Chick had a rifle and they was a little pile of empty shells where he was layin' by the drillin' machine. He must 'a' fought back maybe an hour afore they finally got him."

Henderson's gnarled hands were twisting his big hat into a crumpled mass. "They—they'd shot Buster in the back, it looked like. And where he was a-layin' under the drillin' machine, he'd tried to write somethin' in the dust afore he died, looked like. I reckon them murderers hadn't saw it. Buster, he'd wrote 'Cl—' He meant to write 'Clarkson,' I figure."

JIM BEDFORD'S gray eyes were narrowed. "Clarkson?" he questioned, very quietly. "Sheriff, I got the bird in here that shot at me. He says his name is Clegg." He turned toward the inner office. "Come in here."

The sheriff followed him and caught his breath sharply. In the inside room,

securely bound to chairs, gagged and glaring, were Roy Clegg, the gunman Bedford had captured, and Buck Farrell, the black headed deputy. Bedford indicated the latter captive, gestured mildly. "Your deputy there, he sorta got hard. I figured he'd do well in here sittin' and thinkin' some."

Abruptly Sheriff Henderson strode over to the bound Clegg, grasping him by the shoulders, glaring into his eyes. "You, Clegg," he said harshly and the threat in his voice was deadly. "If you did help kill Chick Gregory you're gonna tell me. And then, if yuh did, I'm gonna give you a gun and blow yore dirty heart out!"

The gangster squirmed vainly. Stepping over beside him, Bedford removed the gag from his mouth and stepped back. "Clegg," he said softly. "You're through. Buster Matthews, one of those two men you and your gang murdered this afternoon—Buster left a note telling who did it."

For an instant the glare in Clegg's small eyes was like that in the eyes of some trapped, wild animal. Then, harshly, he laughed. "It's a damned lie!" he jeered. "I wasn't even out of town all day! Why hell, even Stilwell there can alibi me! Henderson, you better tell this damn Ranger where he gets off or you're gonna——"

"Shut up!" Jim Bedford's voice was low, gentle, but there was something about it that made Clegg hush as quickly as if a hand had been clapped over his mouth. The Ranger turned toward Stilwell. "How about it, Stilwell? Can you alibi him?"

Frank Stilwell hesitated for a long moment. Then, slowly, he shook his head. "No, I can't," he said clearly. "I know where he was until about four o'clock but after that, I don't know."

Out of the corner of his eyes, Jim Bedford looked at Roy Clegg. The gangster's face was absolutely impassive but his eyes were giving him away. His eyes were raging, frightened.

"Where did you see him last?"

Again Stilwell hesitated. "I saw him with Rand Ortega," he said at last. "He and Rand were taking a drink together in the Black Bonanza. That was about four o'clock, maybe a little earlier."

Jim Bedford's eyes had narrowed to slits. If Roy Clegg had been in Death Creek at four o'clock he still would have had time enough to get out to Dry Creek Crossing before Bedford came along just before sunset. And Roy Clegg had been the man who had fired at him, of that Bedford was more and more certain.

"Listen, Sheriff," Clegg spoke up, controlling his rage with obvious effort. "You got to let me see Ortega! You hear! This damn jughead of a Ranger, he wouldn't let me talk to nobody and he throwed a gun on Buck there and tied him up when Buck wanted to go get Rand. Rand can fix this damn Ranger up! You go get Rand, you hear! He can prove I wasn't out there!"

The sheriff opened his mouth to say something but Jim Bedford forestalled him. "That'll do, Clegg," the Ranger snapped. "The sheriff ain't in charge here now. I am—sort of."

Clegg glared. The alarm in his eyes leaped higher. "You are! Say, Sheriff, how about this? Say——"

With a curt inclination of his head Jim Bedford turned toward the outer room. "Stilwell, you stay here and keep 'em quiet, will you?" he asked. "Sheriff, come in here a minute."

Passively the old sheriff obeyed. Bedford closed the outer door, motioned Henderson to a chair. He drew another chair beside the first and sat down.

"How about this Frank Stilwell, Sheriff? He's all right?"

THE sheriff made a weary gesture. "Frank Stilwell is absolutely on the square, Ranger. He's a cowman, or was 'til this here oil boom started and give him a chance to make some money sellin' leases. And he was a good friend of Ben Gregory's too."

Bedford nodded. "I can depend on what he says then? It seems damn odd to me that Clegg would be here in Death Creek at four o'clock and then just about an hour and a half later would be in a gunfight thirty miles away."

"You said you was jumped just before sunset," reminded the sheriff. "Clegg would 'a' had time enough to git out there."

Bedford nodded slowly and apparently dropped the subject. "Tell me about this Diamond Clarkson hombre, Henderson," he requested. "He sounds interesting. Clegg says Clarkson probably did the killing."

The sheriff hesitated. "Well, maybe Clegg is right," he declared grimly. "I don't know much about this Diamond Clarkson but I do know he's a mighty bad hombre."

Henderson hesitated again. "All I know about him is this: About a month ago, maybe a little earlier, Ortega started havin' real trouble with hijackers, holdin' up his booze trucks comin' up to Death Creek from south of the Rio Grande. And that ain't all either. Somebody's been fightin' Ortega tooth and nail, tryin' to kill him, shootin' his men, everything else!

"Ortega told me it was a hellion named Diamond Clarkson fightin' him, a sort of boss outlaw and just plumb poison! I don't know what they're a-fightin' about but I do know they are fightin'! You seen one Clarkson guy git killed, don't yuh forget."

Jim Bedford wrinkled his forehead thoughtfully. "One other thing," he drawled slowly. "Now that Chick Gregory is dead—who gets the Packard fortune?"

Harshly, mirthlessly, old Sheriff Henderson laughed. "All right, I'll bite! Who does? I don't know but, by Gad, I do know this! The next heir is gonna have one hell of a time provin' his hands ain't bloody!"

He swung around, staring at the Ranger, the wild glitter coming again into his faded eyes. "I don't know whether Chick Gregory had any other kinfolks besides his sons or not. I know he didn't leave no will. Chick Gregory was killed because somebody wants that money!"

Jim Bedford's strong fingers played a tattoo on the arm of his chair. "Another thing," he asked. "Aside from Ortega's telling you to keep out of this Gregory case—did you have any other reason for believing Ortega was the man behind the killings?"

Henderson nodded. "Yes. I didn't have though until after Joe Gregory, old Chick's last son, was killed here in Death Creek. They found him layin' out back of a buildin', shot in the back, with nothin' at all to show who done it. But just the next day I heard tell that Roy Clegg, that same guy yuh got tied up in there, why he was drunk and droppin' hints that he knowed all about that killing.

"Well, I went right over to get Clegg. And I couldn't find him 'til way next day and by that time he was sober and he denied flat that he knowed a thing. And Rand Ortega backed him up! Ortega told me that if necessary he could get a dozen men to alibi Clegg but as far as I was concerned I better keep my damn mouth shut and my nose outa the whole business!"

Bedford's eyes narrowed. "Yeah?"

"And then I sent and asked for a Ranger. I reckoned right then that Ortega did know about these killings!"

THE Ranger dropped a soothing hand on the old officer's shoulder. "All right, Sheriff," he drawled. "I reckon I'll just hold Clegg and yore late Buck deputy a while. Got some cells anywhere?"

"I got a kind of jail up on the top floor," explained the sheriff listlessly. "Ain't built a real calaboose yet. Ranger, I wanta know what yo're gonna do?"

Jim Bedford got to his feet. "I'm going to catch me a little shuteye to start with," he declared. "I'm tired. After that I reckon the only thing to do is go catch all these guys, lock 'em all up and then sweat it out of 'em who killed the Gregories and why."

"You'll play hell catchin' Diamond Clarkson," prophesied the sheriff grimly. "Even Rand Ortega ain't been able to do that, and he don't stop at nothin'."

Bedford grinned mildly. "Yeah? Well, let's go take care of these prisoners. By the way, what is Stilwell? One of your deputies?"

The sheriff nodded wearily. "In a way he is. He just works for me part time—for fun he says."

"He must have a goofy idea of what fun is," commented Bedford dryly. The sheriff had stepped in front of him, was starting to open the door to the inner office. It seemed to be stuck and he jerked at it futilely. "Why, the door's locked!" he gasped amazedly, turning to look at Bedford. "It won't open! Stilwell! Oh, Frank! Open this door!"

Jim Bedford's lean body had all of a sudden tensed, like a coiled spring. The room behind the barred door seemed absolutely silent. But the Ranger's keen ears were catching the faint, shuffling sound of footfalls, in the courthouse hallway, to the right.

In a whirling bound, Jim Bedford went back and through the outer door, pulling his gun as he leaped. The dark figure of a man was just darting out of the hallway door as the Ranger emerged and with a snarling challenge Bedford swung toward him. "Halt! Halt, you!"

The shadowy runner leaped back into the blackness of the hallway like a recoiling spring, a flash of orange flame split the blackness and even as the crashing roar of the gun thundered in the Ranger's ears his own revolver was spitting fire. In a headlong, reckless plunge Jim Bedford flung himself across the intervening space and into the hallway.

The hallway was a cave of pitch blackness and somewhere in the back of it were madly scrambling, running feet. A gun flared, Jim Bedford felt the bullet lash past him. He fired at the flash. Somebody screamed, there was the sound of a slamming door, the booming thunder of two more shots—and oddly, the flare of these shots seemed to the Ranger to be muffled, as though something were between him and the gun muzzle—and Bedford was plunging furiously down the hallway, his heavy gun lifted to strike like a bludgeon. He did not want dead men. Dead men aren't very talkative. He did want live men who could squeal!

PERHAPS fifteen feet down the hallway Bedford went racing. His foot caught on something heavy and soft on the floor, he bounded wildly into the air, over the obstacle, regained his balance by a miracle of agility and whirled with a sharp exclamation. A doorway at the rear end of the hallway had opened and he could see out into the darkness. The hallway was empty save for himself and that soft, heavy something on the floor—but that something was the body of a man.

There was a crash of a breaking door to the left, a gush of light as the sheriff broke into his private office and snapped on the room lights. He came whirling through the opened door which led from the private office into the hallway, a long barreled Colt in his right hand whipping up as he caught sight of the shadowy figure of the Ranger.

"Wait!" Jim Bedford's voice was sharp. "It's me, Sheriff! Turn on the hall lights, can you! Somebody's down on the floor."

The sheriff stepped sideways, his fingers fumbling along the wall. There was a sharp click of a switch and a big light bulb set against the ceiling snapped into brilliance. The sheriff gasped sharply, flung up a hand to his throat. "Why it—it's Frank!" he cried incredulously. "It's Frank Stilwell, Ranger! You've killed him!"

Jim Bedford had knelt. The man on the floor was Frank Stilwell and he had been shot twice, through the breast. He lay on his back with his hands clenched into the breast of his shirt and he was breathing only very faintly.

"Get a doctor!" Bedford did not even look up. "Get one quick, Sheriff! This guy's got to talk. He's going fast."

The sheriff turned and fled back into the office and Bedford could hear him excitedly trying to use the phone. The hallway door to the private office was open and as the Ranger's glance swept into the room he saw the chair in which Clegg had been bound, standing just inside the door. The gangster's bonds lay on the floor beside the chair and it was plainly evident that they had been slashed from behind with a sharp knife.

Jim Bedford bent over the deputy on the floor again. Stilwell was opening his eyes. Bloody bubbles were coming on his lips and it looked like he was trying to say something. Jim Bedford bent close.

"Double-crossed!" Stilwell's voice was a whispering ghost. "Double-crossed me! Damn him, he——" a spasm of agony crossed his countenance and he tried to raise a hand to his face. Swiftly wiping the deputy's lips, Bedford noted that there was a bleeding gash just at the base of Stilwell's hair, above his forehead, a gash such as might have been made by a not overly heavy blow.

"Told Clegg to—hit me easy—make it look like—getaway." Stilwell's voice was so faint the Ranger could scarcely make out the words. "Double-crossed me—damn him! I—listen, Bedford—the Gregory killings—after Packard fortune—Diamond Clarkson is—is——" Frank Stilwell made a final, desperate effort to finish his sentence and failed. For an instant his eyes seemed to be trying to complete the message his lips could not finish, then, swiftly, his face contorted, the eyes closed and his head

dropped limply back. Shaking his head grimly, Jim Bedford stood up.

"Sheriff!" he called softly. "Never mind that doc now! He's dead. Come here." He turned and walked deliberately to the end of the hallway, staring out into the darkness. The door, opening into the alley in rear of the court house, was within fifty feet of the first, straggling brush that covered the oil-field. The escaping prisoners could have gone in any of a dozen different directions and have been hidden by darkness before they had run fifty steps.

SHERIFF HENDERSON was in the hallway behind Bedford, kneeling beside Stilwell's body, breathing hard. "I don't savvy!" he cried bewilderedly as the Ranger turned back. "Yuh killed Stilwell? What for, what was happenin'?"

"I didn't kill him," denied the Ranger softly. "Clegg did, I think. Look at the breast of Stilwell's shirt. I wasn't that close."

The sheriff's eyes dropped to the breast of the dead man's shirt. So close had been the pistol that had killed him that the powder flame had burned the cloth. Bewildered the sheriff looked up. "What did happen then?" he demanded. "Buck Farrell, he's gone, too!"

Bedford's face was quizzical. "I don't know exactly what did happen," he said softly. "But from what Stilwell said I gather he was lettin' Roy Clegg stage a getaway, makin' it look like Clegg busted loose, hit Stilwell on the head and run. But Clegg double-crossed him and killed him instead. Clegg's gone. Cat's outa the bag now."

With deliberate fingers, the Ranger began to reload his gun. "Henderson," he said very softly. "I reckon we've messed around with this long enough. We're gonna go catch every damn one of this Ortega mob and all the Clarkson outfit we can, too. And then somebody in each of those two gangs is gonna talk and talk plenty. C'mon, let's get started!"

CHAPTER VI

RAID!

IT WAS just before dawn, the first faint streaks of coming day painting the east when Jim Bedford with the old sheriff at his back put his shoulder to the closed doors of the Black Bonanza to force an entrance.

No one had answered his knocking. The very fact that the doors of the big building were closed and locked was unusual, so Sheriff Henderson declared. Usually they were open day and night.

With a quick heave of giant muscles, Bedford hurled his hundred and eighty pounds against the doors. They sagged but held. He drew back, smashed at them again. This time they gave. There was a sudden, snarling challenge from the inside as the doors flew open. Inside was a guard with a sawed-off shotgun, just bringing the weapon up.

Whirling sideways, Jim Bedford knocked down the muzzle of the shotgun. "Cut that, you!" he warned. "This is the Law! Where's Ortega?"

The guard was staring at a little official credential card that the Ranger held in his hand. His jaw dropped. "Oh, oh!" he gasped. "Rangers! Why—why Ortega ain't here, Cap'n. He's gone!" He abandoned the shotgun to Bedford's grasp, making no move to resist further. Resisting a Ranger is a notorious way to commit suicide in Texas.

Bedford half turned. "Frisk him," he directed the sheriff. "All right, come on. We want to see everybody in here, fella, savvy?"

Working hurriedly but thoroughly, they scoured the building, rounding up eleven men. The score or so of dance-hall girls on the second floor Bedford ignored and the one man who offered resistance he disarmed so quickly that the shotgun guard did not even have time to cry out his frantic warning. "He's a Ranger, guys! Lay off!"

Between them the sheriff and Bedford herded their eleven captives down into the hallway while the Ranger made another search of the building. He returned empty handed, his face puzzled. Rand Ortega, Roy Clegg and the deputy, Buck Farrell, were nowhere to be found. He had hardly expected to find Clegg and Farrell, of course, but that Ortega also should be missing seemed odd.

"They ain't half of 'em here," informed the sheriff hoarsely. "Ortega's got all his real gunmen and has gone somewhere, Bedford. They ain't one of his real gunmen in this here gang."

The Ranger nodded. He selected the

man who had tried to bar his entrance and glared at him. "You!" he snapped coldly. "Where's Ortega?"

The man wavered, opened and shut his mouth uncertainly. "I—I don't know!" he said at last.

"The hell yuh don't!" snarled the sheriff truculently. "Listen, you! You talk or I'll gut shoot yuh, right here!"

"I don't know, I swear I don't!" wailed the guard. "Ortega, he took his mob and went tearin' outa here right after midnight. He did! Ain't that so, boys? Ask anybody here if it ain't so!"

Heads nodded violently. "That's the truth," somebody agreed. "Hell, Rand Ortega don't tell us nothin', boss. We're just flunkies, we don't know nothin'!"

"When did you say he left?"

"Right after midnight, boss. Took a dozen guys with him."

"Where'd he go?"

The guard shook his head. "I don't know that, I tell you! I—"

With an abrupt swing Sheriff Henderson whipped his revolver up and struck with the heavy barrel at the guard's head. The man ducked frantically, the blow missed, but the sheriff grabbed him by the shirt and whirled up the heavy gun to strike again.

"Don't hit me! Don't hit me, Sheriff! I don't know, I tell yuh! I don't know! I—Ortega went away south of here! Clarkson hijacked one of Ortega's trucks and Ortega went after him. That's all I know, honest to——"

"Shut up!" roared the sheriff, hurling him back into the huddle of men behind. Holstering his gun, he turned. "That's the truth, I reckon, Bedford. Sounds like it, at any rate."

"Diamond Clarkson hijacking one of Ortega's booze trucks?" questioned the Ranger softly. "Ortega's sorta optimistic if he thinks he'll catch the booger waiting around, ain't he?"

"Sorta," agreed the sheriff dryly. "That hombre Clarkson just fades into thin air after he does somethin'. What'll we do with these guys?"

"Lock 'em up," decided Bedford shortly. "Then we'll see if we can't find Ortega. You got anybody in this town you can trust?"

"The Magnus Oil boys is all right," affirmed the sheriff. "So's the Plains guys. You want a posse or somethin'?"

"A few men might come in handy," admitted the Ranger quietly. "Come on, let's go. Head out, boys, toward the court house!"

SULLENLY the group of prisoners started for the door, the sheriff herding them along while Jim Bedford strolled along behind. Bedford's gray eyes were narrowed, very thoughtful. His queer hunch of the night before, that something big was about to break, was still on him and the absence of Rand Ortega and his gunmen was giving him something new to think about. The shotgun guard might be telling the truth, he probably was telling what he thought was true but was it true in fact? What other reason would Rand Ortega have for departing unceremoniously in the early morning hours?

They locked the eleven prisoners in the improvised jail on the second floor of the court house, and while Bedford waited, Sheriff Henderson went over to the Magnus field camp to get a few men. He returned, beaming, with two hard bitten, drooping mustached veterans one of whom Jim Bedford joyously recognized as Zeke Chester, an ex-Texas Ranger.

"Howdy, Zeke," Bedford hailed him. "Hombre, I'm glad to see you! What you doing down here?"

Zeke Chester's leathery face expanded in a wide grin, disclosing tobacco stained teeth beneath the grizzled, Texas style mustache. "Why, dog my cats, looks like Big Jim Bedford, damn if it don't!" he exclaimed. "Hi, boy! Sheriff here was a-tellin' me, we might have a lotta fun if we'd come along."

"I hadda lucky break, findin' these two guys," explained the sheriff. "They're special officers for the Magnus Company, Jim, just come in to see who's been stealin' drillin' equipment off the company down here in Death Creek. Yuh know Poke Warner here?"

The other extended a gnarled hand. "I've heard of yuh," he acknowledged in a slow drawl, meeting Bedford's grasp with one equally crushing. "Seems like yo're one of these here—uh—damn Taixas Rangers, ain't that right?"

"That's what I hear," grinned Bedford. "You used to be in the Mounted Customs outfit, down around Del Rio, didn't you?"

"That's right," admitted Warner. "Customs ain't been the same since I

quit, neither. They claim it's better."

"That's why they fired him," contributed Chester. "As a Customs Inspector he just couldn't git accustomed to doin' no work. What yuh got on yore mind, Jim?"

Jim Bedford's lean face turned grave. "Sit down boys," he invited. "I've got a little business that's got to be attended to pronto. And the sheriff here is sorta running outa deputies. One was murdered about a couple of hours ago and the other one's run off. Looks like he was a party to the killing."

IN SHORT sentences Bedford told the two what he knew about the mix-up, carefully omitting any references to the old sheriff's confession of being himself an escaped convict. The faces of the two special officers were serious as he finished.

"And yuh want us to help look fer these gents, Clegg and Farrell, and likewise see what's become of this here Ortega hombre, huh?" asked Chester quietly. "Sure we'll help yuh. Sheriff, yuh use yore phone any?"

"Henderson's going to stay here and take care of that end of it," interposed Bedford softly. "He's pretty near wore out as it is. No, now Sheriff, this is important. Somebody's got to stay here and you know about everything. We don't. You get on the phone and the telegraph and shoot out notices all around for the boys to be on the lookout for Clegg and Farrell. And see if you can't find out something about Ortega and his mob. If there's been a fight somewhere, why somebody ought to know about it. Hold this gang upstairs for investigation. We'll be able to charge 'em all with something."

"And whatta we gonna do to find these missin' hombres?" inquired Zeke Chester. "Yuh figger if we go out and holler they'll come right outa the bushes and say, 'Here I am?' "

The Ranger shook his head. "No. But look here. There's just two roads south from here over which a man could get to the Border in a hurry, or come up in a hurry, if he was headin' north instead of south. I figure Clegg and Farrell probably will take out for Mexico as the safest place to hide. Also, look here. This shotgun guard of Ortega's said Ortega and his mob was out trying to catch a guy who had hijacked a load of Ortega's liquor! That booze would be coming north and it would have to come up over one of those two roads, for part of the way, at any rate."

Zeke Chester scratched his grizzled head. "Yeah, that's right," he admitted. "And if we-all go take a little pasear up and down them two roads, why mebbe——"

"Maybe we'll find what we're looking for," completed the Ranger. "Personal, I think Ortega and his gang will come back here in the next few hours. But I'd admire to know where they are and what they're doing right now! And I know damn well Clegg and Farrell ain't returnin'."

"Yuh reckon we better git some more men, somebody to stay here and help yuh, Sheriff, case yuh need help sudden?" asked Poke Warner quietly. "We can git some Magnus guys."

The old sheriff shook his head wearily. He was very tired, dark circles under his eyes and the odd glitter in those faded orbs was even more evident than it had been the night before.

"Never mind me," he dissented harshly. "Old Chick Gregory had three cowhands workin' for him. They'll be comin' in to see me sometime this mornin' and they'll be packin' their guns."

Jim Bedford nodded. "All right. Suppose we go, boys. I got a car parked down here in a parking yard. We can scout around some here in the field first and see if we can't pick up a trail before we try going it blind."

THEY started for the door. Sheriff Henderson had settled down at his desk and had the phone in his hands when suddenly it rang. He put the receiver to his ear. "Sheriff Henderson talkin'. Yeah. What's that?"

His face changed abruptly and he jerked around in his chair. "Wait a minute, Bedford! Yeah? North of the Magnus pump station you say? How far? Ten miles? Yeah! Wait a minute, hold the phone! I'll send somebody right out!"

Pressing the phone against his breast, Sheriff Henderson swung around excitedly. "Here's yore lead, Bedford!" he cried. "This here oil scout on the phone says there's a battle goin' on at Morriarty's ranch, ten miles north of the Magnus pump station on the road to San Quentin! Yuh know that road?

He says he can hear machine guns! Let's go!"

"Wait a minute!" interposed Bedford quickly. "You stay here, Henderson. We've got Clegg and Farrell to find yet. You get those wires out and take care of this end here. If we need help we'll get it at that pipeline pump station. They've got a phone there, haven't they?"

Zeke Chester nodded rapidly. "Shore. And I know that country like a book, Jim; I know old Paso Morriarty's rancho jest like it was my own. Le's git goin'."

Jim Bedford in the lead, they raced out the door, heedless of the old sheriff's barking protests. Getting his battered automobile out of the parking yard where he had left it the night before, Bedford motioned his two companions into the rear seat and swung the machine down the bumpy main street of Death Creek at top speed.

"Wait a minute, Jim!" Chester commanded loudly. "Stop by the Magnus camp jest a second. We got a couple rifles in our duds, mebbe we'll be needin' 'em."

Bedford nodded. Roaring on through the boom town he swung up to the gate of the great Magnus Petroleum Company's camp and Zeke Chester flung himself over the side, running toward the great, temporary building which housed the big company's field offices. He popped in the door, came back into sight almost immediately, carrying two Winchesters and a couple of filled cartridge belts. Another man was running along at his side, talking excitedly.

"It's Diamond Clarkson and Rand Ortega, they say," Chester cried, scrambling back into the car. "Jimmy Carter here's just got a message from the pump station. They say rum runners is fightin' to beat hell up north of there and somebody says it's Diamond Clarkson they got penned up. Let's go. Turn left at the next corner, Bedford, that's the road."

Jim Bedford fairly hurled the battered car forward again. He took the corner on two wheels, in a cloud of dust, just missing a giant, loaded, oilfield truck which was lumbering ponderously into Death Creek. The road was incredibly rough and the car was bouncing wildly.

Driving with every ounce of his road skill, Bedford was thinking hard. Disjointed as it all seemed, it was steadily becoming more and more obvious that there was some definite connection between the Gregory murders, the Ortega-Clarkson feud and, of course, the queer murder of Frank Stilwell, the deputy.

This last killing seemed especially weird. Why Stilwell should aid Roy Clegg to escape, as Stilwell apparently had and why Clegg should kill him—well, it was hard to understand to say the least. But Frank Stilwell had known something! Stilwell had tried to talk. And Stilwell had tried to say, so Bedford believed, that Diamond Clarkson was connected with the Gregory murders. Perhaps Stilwell had been trying to say that Clarkson was the killer.

With the escape of Roy Clegg, who certainly would communicate with Ortega as rapidly as possible there was faint hope now of building up a case before wading boldly into the matter. As Bedford saw it now, his cue was to assume direct, smashing action, get his hands on both Ortega and Clarkson and then try to solve the Gregory mystery. Regardless of whether or not they were connected with the Gregory murders, Ortega and his men certainly were violating the law in running a saloon and gambling house, in smuggling booze and doubtless in a dozen other ways. They could be held for these crimes. And Diamond Clarkson and his men, if they could be caught, could be held for hijacking.

THE battered car was whirling along the road as fast as the rough and rocky inequalities of the surface would permit, faster in fact than ninety-nine drivers out of a hundred could have driven. Zeke Chester was sitting beside Bedford, holding on desperately.

The road swept up a savage, towering ridge, the car topped the crest, swung around a broken chaos of mighty rock fragments and Bedford looked quickly back. Five or six miles behind he still could see the southern fringe of the Death Creek oilfield, although the boom town itself was now lost from sight. He turned his head back to the road in front.

Poke Warner, clinging to the side of the rear seat cried out sharply and

simultaneously Bedford saw what had caused the veteran officer to utter his sharp exclamation. On ahead, perhaps three or four miles on down the trail, a black column of smoke was shooting up into the morning sky.

Chapter VII

WAR!

WITH a racing rush the battered car went over the last pitching ridge separating it from the base of the column of smoke and again it was Zeke Chester who cried out.

"It's a car, boys!" he yelped excitedly. "Lookut, it's an auto burnin'! Stop 'er, Jim, quick!"

Jim Bedford slammed on his brakes. His car was bounding savagely as it flung itself down a slope, at the bottom of which was a narrow, steep sided arroyo. In this arroyo, squarely in the center of the road was the burning car, a highspeed truck, nearly burned out but still a seething mass of flames. The truck lay on its side and little streams of liquid, blazing weirdly were creeping away, vanishing in smoke and flame before they had gone a yard.

"Booze of some kind," suggested Warner. "Lookut the stuff burn! And —oh, oh, look there! No, right there, in front of us! Blood, by Gad!"

Warner was leaning over Bedford's shoulder, pointing excitedly and following the pointing finger the Ranger's gray eyes fell upon the grim stain on the rock ledged road. It was blood, quite fresh looking.

"There's tire marks pullin' around it," pointed out Chester, his keen eyes snapping. "Yeah and look on the road over beyond the fire too—right on the slope there! See where some car must 'a' turned?"

Jim Bedford settled back in his seat. "Hold on," he commanded crisply. "I'm gonna hightail by this blaze in a plumb hurry now! Watch it!" He shot his car ahead at full speed.

Pulling at the peak of its power, the big motor hurtled them down, to the left just a trifle and past the burning car, almost in the flames. The terrific heat lashed at them, they were by, jolting wildly back into the road again, climbing the other side. Bedford brought the car to a halt. Jumping out he began to use his eyes hurriedly, studying the burning car, the adjacent ridge sides, the mute evidence of the tracks in the road.

"Somebody caught 'em here in the arroyo," decided Zeke Chester shrewdly. "They got that leadin' car but the second car behind the first one turned and got away. Somebody else has drove past this here burnin' car, just like we did, prob'ly chasin' that second car that fled away from here."

Bedford nodded. "Looks that way," he agreed. "Must have been a fight or something but I sure don't see any bodies layin' around anywhere, do you? Let's go on."

"I reckon that'd be right smart," put in Poke Warner. "Somethin' is happenin' down south of here, Ranger, I bet a cookie."

Nodding, Jim Bedford motioned his two companions back into their seats and pulled himself hurriedly behind the wheel, setting the car in motion again.

"It's not more'n five, six miles to the Morriarty ranch," informed Zeke Chester loudly. "What yuh tarryin' fer, Jim? Let's travel!"

THE powerful car leaped ahead. Holding the wheel momentarily with his left hand, Jim Bedford reached across his chest to the big revolver snuggling in its holster under his left armpit, loosening it slightly. He gripped the steering wheel with both hands again and the auto fairly leaped clear off the ground as he fed it the gas and it plunged on, down a dropping slope at reckless speed.

The country here was savagely desolate, rolling, great parallel rock studded ridges, separated by narrow, solid rock bottomed arroyos. Stunted brush here and there and cactus was the only vegetation and not a house, a windmill, a cow, not a living thing was visible.

The road clambered like a mountain goat trail. Jouncing savagely along, Jim Bedford's gray eyes time and again noted the tiny, bright, winking patches in the road and along the side, empty, exploded cartridges. Here and there in the brief stretches where the road fought through sand or across the narrow flats between ridges there were tire marks of racing cars and on the steep slopes in several places were the long, black marks of wildly skidding tires. It looked very much as though someone

or rather several someones had engaged in a running fight over this trail, a fight waged from frantically racing automobiles.

"You can see the Morriarty ranch from that next ridge!" Zeke Chester was shouting to make himself heard above the rush and roar of their headlong passage. "Better go easy, Jim, take a look-see first! We go divin' into a rumpus, we're liable to be plenty dead mighty quick."

Bedford nodded curtly, fed the car more gas, sending it up the slope in a roaring rush. At the top he paused abruptly, standing on the brake pedal, staring ahead and down.

A flat, perhaps a mile wide between steep sided ridges, was ahead of them, a flat partially covered by low, tangled mesquite, greasewood and cactus. About halfway across the flat was a low, roofed house, which evidently was of adobe or rock. Behind the house was a windmill and beyond that Bedford could see what he judged to be a rock walled corral and a number of low sheds, undoubtedly ranch buildings and sheep sheds.

An automobile stood in the road down ahead of him, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, apparently abandoned; and over beyond the ranch, where the road passed by the windmill, Bedford believed he could make out another car. Far over to the left, in the brush, was what looked like a man's hat bobbing along, but aside from that there wasn't a living soul in sight.

"Yuh reckon they're still there?" growled Chester doubtfully. "Hell, they ain't nothin' in——"

He bit off his words in mid-sentence. Crackling like a pneumatic riveting hammer, from somewhere in the brush over to the left front had come the drumming discharges of a sub-machine gun. And with a sharp exclamation Bedford pointed to where the bullets were striking, in the dusty yard in front of the ranch and against the wall of the building itself, no doubt. In the yard the bullets were kicking up white splashes of dust a yard high or more, easily visible.

PERHAPS a dozen shots the invisible gun fired in its burst before falling silent. Watching the ranch like a hawk, Jim Bedford's sharp eyes caught a tiny, winking flash from the dark doorway, probably the flash of a rifle in the hands of one of the defenders.

"Well, here we are!" drawled Poke Warner. "How do we horn into this here party, Ranger?"

"We'll drive down to that car," decided Bedford instantly. "From there on I reckon we'll do better on foot. Now keep yore eyes open, you guys! There may be some gents down there that won't just exactly appreciate havin' us sashay in sorta uninvited this way."

Zeke Chester chuckled and lifted his rifle from his lap. "We'll argy with 'em, mebbe," he commented, levering in a cartridge. "Le's go, guy, looks like we're late now."

Again the car leaped ahead, diving down the pitching slope. The road, veering, uneven, rocky, would not have passed muster as even a fourth class, emergency detour in a more thickly settled country and Bedford realized that the men down below would hardly be expecting much interruption in their gun powder festivities. Travelers on this shortcut road were still few and far between and had been still fewer before the giant Magnus Oil Company, forging an outlet for its oil production in the Death Creek field, had built a pipeline from Death Creek south and then east to join with other lines in other oilfields and eventually deliver the oil at tidewater on the Gulf of Mexico.

At regular intervals along this pipeline, as on all oil or gas pipelines, were pump stations, isolated, lonely, many of them, where giant machinery boosted the oil onward in its long journey through the lines. It was from one of these stations, the so-called Magnus Sandia Station, about ten miles south and slightly east of the Morriarty ranch, that the news of the fight had come, telegraphed into Death Creek over the Magnus Company's telegraph line which ran along on stubby poles above the buried pipeline.

Bedford sent his car plunging recklessly across the narrow gully at the foot of the ridge, out across the flat, and racing up beside the standing automobile which he had seen from the top of the ridge. He stopped in a cloud of dust, twisting in his seat to jerk free his rifle, leaping out to join

Chester and Warner, who were already out of the car, Winchesters in hand, examining the other machine hurriedly.

It was a big, gray touring car with the side curtains up. There was a bullet hole in the windshield, a neat star, and there was another gash which looked as though it might have been caused by a bullet in the top of the left front fender. The car bore a Texas license.

Jim Bedford stepped impatiently away from it, motioning toward the brush. "Come on," he commanded. "That car will stay there. Let's see if we can't find somebody that can talk."

"Wait a minute now," drawled Zeke Chester calmly. "Jest what are we gonna do, Jim? Unless I'm mistook plenty there ain't neither gang of these here hombres gonna welcome us with open arms as yuh might say. What's yore plan?"

"Just this," answered Jim. "We'll catch some of these guys in the brush and persuade 'em to talk, and then we'll try our hand at catching the rest of 'em and likewise collecting the other gang in the house."

Poke Warner grinned dryly. "Is that all?" he inquired sardonically. "Jest catch all this gang in the brush and then catch all that gang in the house? That's shore gonna be easy, ain't it?"

"Come on," repeated Bedford. "We're gonna try it."

He led the way at a trot, off the road into the brush, in the general direction in which he judged the hidden machine gunner to be. Trailing after him, the two Magnus officers followed closely, dodging around stunted, thorny bushes, hard put to keep up with the long legged Ranger. They dropped behind a cut bank where they could stand straight.

There was a sudden crash of firing in the distance, the drumming spatter of the machine gun, a wild yell. A bullet struck the top of the cut bank above them, ricocheted off over their heads with a weird screaming, and Zeke Chester flung himself against the bank, clawing up the side, recklessly, peering over the top.

"Hell, boys, they're a-leavin'!" he bellowed amazedly. "They're a-leavin'! C'mon, run like hell!"

"Warner," directed Bedford hurriedly. "Beat it back to the car and come on with it if you can. Drive away from that other car, anyway. Let's go, Zeke."

"Say, now, ain't I gonna get in on the fight?" protested Warner. "I—aw hell!" he shrugged resignedly. Chester and Bedford had already disappeared over the top of the bank.

Chapter VIII

AMBUSHED!

SCRAMBLING up and over the top of the cut bank Jim Bedford and the veteran Zeke had found themselves at once in the midst of a smashing battle.

The Morriarty ranch-house, a low, stone affair, was about two hundred yards away, partially masked by intervening mesquite. Bullets were whining through this mesquite, clipping off branches. And somewhere over to the left the sub-machine gun they had first heard was again raving, firing bursts of from five to ten shots, with hardly an interval between, while the flatter, more snapping crashes of high power rifles and the heavier explosions of big revolvers were mixing in merrily.

There was not a man in sight. Something was happening on the other side of the ranch-house, something that was arousing the most furious activity on the part of the besiegers.

Bent almost double to work his way through the brush and sprinting hard, Jim Bedford slid his left arm through the sling strap of his rifle, freeing his hands, and drew his revolver. Behind him Zeke Chester shouted suddenly and fired, the flash of his Winchester going right by Bedford's side. The Ranger leaped like a spurred horse, ahead and to one side, something spatted into a tree trunk just behind where he had been, old Zeke fired again and Bedford saw a man come suddenly up from nowhere, fifty feet ahead of him, clutching at his throat and pitching over backward.

"Mighty close," panted Zeke hoarsely, sprinting hard to catch up with the Ranger. "Boy, I just did see his rifle muzzle! I——"

Jim Bedford plunged sideways again, firing as he leaped. There was a blaze of flame from a clump of brush to their left front, old Zeke flung himself flat on the ground and began to shoot with lightning rapidity, working his Win-

chester so fast it sounded like a machine gun itself. He was up and running again, reloading as he ran, before Bedford had more than reached the ranch-house. Plunging past the clump of bushes the old officer grunted with satisfaction as he caught a glimpse of a booted foot sticking out, a foot very still.

Jim Bedford reached the side of the ranch-house and raced along beside it, striving to reach the other side. He whipped past the bullet splintered door, heard the sudden, thundering roar of a motor from somewhere on the other side of the house, the crash of firing swept wildly up and the roar of the motor rocketed away.

Just in time to see the roaring machine vanish into the brush, Bedford reached the corner. He caught just one glimpse of the car, a big, black truck evidently of the high speed variety for already it was a quarter of a mile away and going like the wind.

It was gone in a spurting cloud of dust and out of the brush to the right, two hundred yards or more down the road came a second machine, a touring car, bounding wildly as it plunged into the road, barely slowing to pick up a big man who came leaping from behind a point of rocks, twisting to fire his rifle at the fleeing truck as he came. The touring car was crowded with men and the big man was Rand Ortega.

The Ranger had only a kaleidoscopic flash of these racing machines before they had vanished in clouds of dust. Then he was in the midst of the backwash of the fight, the remainder of Ortega's men trying to assemble and follow their leader in another car, undoubtedly the one back up the road.

Over to the right a half seen man tore by through the masking mesquite, shouting as he went, "Come on, guys! I'll git the car! C'mon!"

Another man came racing around the corner of the ranch-house. He cried out sharply in surprise as he saw the Ranger and leaped back, firing as he leaped. Snapping sideways like a whiplash, Bedford fired just once.

THERE was a wild yell from Zeke Chester, at the other corner of the ranch-house. "Back! Git back, Jim! They're a-runnin' toward that car!" The old officer had whirled as he yelled. He began rapidly to blaze away at something or somebody to the northward, in the direction from which he had come. From somewhere up the road, where Bedford and his companions had left their car parked by the gangster machine, came a rapid splatter of flat reports of a higher power rifle, interspersed with the heavier explosions of a pistol or revolver.

Jim Bedford had spun about in his tracks, racing across the yard to hurdle the low fence and was running like a deer, back up the road. Behind him Zeke Chester was still shooting rapidly.

With a wild, exultant whoop Zeke Chester flung aside his emptied rifle and took out after the Ranger, pulling his revolver as he ran. Two hundred yards to the northward, in the center of a thick patch of greasewood, he had seen his sharpshooting opponent throw up his rifle and pitch backward, obviously stopped for keeps.

Jim Bedford heard a shout, Poke Warner's voice, and then the roar of a motor, rapidly approaching. With a rush a car came sweeping around the bend in the trail, just ahead, its brakes screaming as the driver sighted the sprinting Ranger and Bedford leaped sideways, whirling up his revolver.

"Don't shoot! It's me, dang it! Git in, quick!" It was Poke Warner at the wheel, leaning out and shouting excitedly. In his right hand, gripping the steering wheel, he held a revolver, his hat was gone, a tiny trickle of blood was disfiguring his face and crumpled in the front seat beside him was the body of a man.

"Git in, Ranger! Quick! The woods is alive with 'em, looks like! Jumped me, they did, just as I was gittin' ready to drive down and set in on yore party!"

Panting, Jim Bedford still managed to grin. He stepped onto the running-board, holding to the top. "Who's this you got, Warner? Oh, oh!" He whistled surprisedly. The unconscious man in the seat beside Warner was Buck Farrell, the missing deputy.

"Come divin' outa the brush not knowin' I was there and I sorta ganged him," explained the Magnus officer hurriedly, starting the car down the road again.

"They was another guy out in the weeds, shootin' at me first then turnin' and shootin' at you all," Warner went

on. "He—well, by Golly! Look who's here!" The car had swept around a turn to disclose Zeke Chester pounding up the road, puffing and blowing like a foundering horse.

"D—damn rabbit!" gasped Chester, grabbing at the windshield post to support himself as the car stopped beside him. "Run a man to death! I swear, I ——"

"Yo're gettin' fat, Zeke," gibed Warner. "Look what I done! Whilst you and Bedford was lettin' all the rest of 'em git away!"

"Not all of 'em," panted Chester.

"What happened to that other car, Poke?" asked Bedford.

"Nobody's gonna be drivin' that other car," affirmed Poke Warner, grinning. "I took off the timer. Smart hombre, that's me!"

"Yah," Zeke Chester spat derisively. "Smart aleck, yuh mean!"

THE car was turning into the ranch yard. As it swung the Ranger's glance, directed northward, saw the dust of two more cars just sweeping over the crest of the tall ridge which formed the north wall of the flat in which the ranch stood.

"Look there!" he pointed. "More autos coming!"

"It's gettin' entirely too dang populous out here!" complained old Zeke, jumping to the ground and trotting hurriedly toward the place he had dropped his Winchester.

"Yo! It's the sheriff a-comin'!" Zeke Chester's loud voice was coming from somewhere around the corner of the ranch-house. "It's the sheriff, boys! I know that old, red car of his'n!"

Poke Warner looked at the Ranger. "Ast him if he sees any signs of the army and the navy comin' to join in," he requested dryly.

Old Zeke Chester had come around the corner again, trailing his recovered Winchester and had gone down on his knees beside the man Bedford had shot. He was wiping the gangster's lips, talking to him in a low voice and the man appeared to be answering with difficulty.

From the northward two automobiles, the foremost a dingy red machine, were whirling up to the ranch. They stopped by the fence, men piling out and from the red machine Sheriff Jeff Henderson came running into the yard, glaring wildly about, his jaw tightening.

"Yuh get 'em?" he demanded loudly. "Yuh get 'em, Bedford?"

Jim Bedford smiled. "The main ones got away," he dissented softly. "We were just going on after 'em. Can you leave two or three men here? There's some more hombres out in that mesquite behind the house."

"I got plenty of men," asserted the sheriff, waving a hand toward the group behind him. "These here is Chick Gregory's cowhands and some of his closest friends. We couldn't stay outa this fight!"

The Magnus special officer, Zeke Chester, got up from his kneeling position beside the wounded man, abandoning him to the hands of a couple of the possemen, one of whom seemed to be something of a first aid expert. He came over to the Ranger and the sheriff, grinning as he came.

"It was Diamond Clarkson's mob, all right," Zeke informed pleasedly. "That guy is one of Ortega's hellions. He ain't hurt bad but I told him he was gonna die and he believed me." The aged reprobate chuckled heartlessly.

"He come clean. He says what happened is that Rand Ortega got a tip that Clarkson was gonna hijack one of Ortega's booze trucks some'rs round these parts last night. Ortega come out to sorta interfere with these here plans but somethin' went wrong and Clarkson's guys finally got the truck. It was that truck we saw burnin'. Ortega's gang run into Clarkson's mob right after they'd got the truck and chased 'em back to the ranch here. The Clarkson gang had to hole up here to fix their own truck, had a bullet hole in it or somethin'."

"Did he know anything about these Gregory killings?" demanded Bedford.

"Didn't ask him. I didn't exactly have long enough to git his whole life history. But he says Farrell and Clegg found Ortega just about thirty minutes before we horned in. He says Clegg's with Rand!"

"Somebody's got to stay here," Jim Bedford spoke quickly. "Three of the posse's gonna stay with you, Zeke. You take charge here and do what you can for these wounded gents."

"That's talkin' sense now!" applauded Poke Warner. "Leave him be yore

rear guard, 'steada me! He ain't bright enough to take along!"

"Is that so!" retorted Zeke. "Leave him here and lemme go, Jim. He don't know how to fight nothin' except booze. That's the truth!"

THE sheriff had chosen three reluctant possemen to remain at the ranch. With a quick last word to Zeke Chester, Bedford waved the grinning Poke Warner into the seat of Bedford's car, pulled himself behind the steering wheel and whirled the machine around to take up anew the southward chase. The sheriff's two cars followed hard in his tracks.

The road, now crashing over a bewildering series of jutting outcroppings and twisting like a snake's trail, up, down and around through the giant masses of rock, demanded Bedford's entire attention. They swept on, minute after minute.

"There's that Magnus pipeline!" said Warner suddenly, pointing. "See where the telegraph poles come over the hill? Right over there? Ain't far to that station now."

Bedford nodded again, slightly increasing his speed. As the car swung around a short curve he glanced quickly back, saw that the sheriff's two machines were hanging doggedly on, following, but dropping far behind. Poke Warner chuckled.

"Sorta educatin' them guys on drivin' cowtrails, ain't yuh?" he demanded. "Tryin' to lose 'em?"

"Hope not," denied Bedford shortly. "They're liable to come in handy. What's that yonder?"

"That's the Sandia station! Boy, howdy, we been a-travelin'! See the tanks? They got six of those big babies, all fulla oil. Say, look there in the road! Lookut the tracks!"

Warner was pointing excitedly to the road just ahead, spinning under the flying wheels. There were patches of sand here and there and across them, plainly visible, was a broad, staggering track, such as would be made by a big, automobile tire, down and speedily pounding into shreds under the merciless hammering of a badly limping car.

The Ranger's gray eyes gleamed. "Down tire!" he shouted. "Ortega's lamed that truck again. Look sharp!"

They were plunging up another of the innumerable hills. The roaring car topped the crest. There, ahead of them, in a close walled valley was the Magnus Oil Company's Sandia Pump Station. One big structure, like a warehouse, constructed of sheet iron and housing the pumping machinery, in the center of a group of smaller edifices, bunkhouses, offices and the like. To the west of the buildings and on higher ground were a half dozen giant oil storage tanks, fifty-five thousand barrel affairs, painted a metallic aluminum color to minimize evaporation of their valuable contents.

"They must 'a' hightailed right on by," screamed Warner excitedly. "No—no, hell, there's the truck, there's a guy shootin'—Good God, look out, look out ——"

Cling-g-g! Something screamed from the side of the car, Poke Warner clutched at the Ranger's arm with a sharp cry, there was a thud, another, the roaring chorus of the motor broke and the flying car flung sideways in a sickening skid.

JIM BEDFORD'S great hands tore furiously at the wheel, his brakes shrieking. There was a crash as the left side wheels dropped into the ditch, careening the car at a forty-five degree angle. The stunning jolt with which it stopped hurtled Poke Warner against the windshield, completing the demolition of the already shattered glass. A bullet hit the roadway, flinging up a splash of dust and Poke Warner, his face bleeding in several places where he had been cut by the glass, was shoving madly at his companion.

"Git outa here! Outa here, quick! We're right in range! Hit the dirt, Bedford, hit it!" Warner dived headlong after the Ranger, into the rocky ditch, on the low side of the car. Twisting about, Jim Bedford retrieved his rifle from the car, yanked the rear door open and fumbled hurriedly in the pocket for cartridges.

Poke Warner instinctively had clung to his Winchester all through the crash. He now sprawled himself out behind the crumpled left front fender and began to shoot. slowly, carefully, wiping his bloody face with his sleeve between shots. He looked at Bedford.

"Where the hell's the sheriff?" he demanded. "Ain't he comin'? We're in

a hole, Ranger, them guys got us by the short hair! Over there behind them rocks they are, see?"

"I see." Jim Bedford was lying flat, peering under the car. The ambushed marksmen ahead were in a nest of heavy, jagged rocks, perhaps a hundred yards away, commanding a perfect sweep of the road from the point where it came over the crest of the hill, on down past the pump station. Bedford and Warner, behind their car, were in a shallow depression offering wholly inadequate protection from the hidden riflemen's sweeping bullets—and the rocky, barren ground for fifty yards and more in every direction was clear of cover.

Another bullet lashed under the car, ricocheting, screaming up between them. Warner swore luridly and blazed back.

"Where's that damn sheriff?" he demanded. "He git lost?"

Jim Bedford had wormed his way completely under the car and was staring over his rifle sights from under the opposite runningboard, striving to locate the hidden enemy.

"The sheriff? Something's happened to him, I reckon," he drawled, answering Poke Warner. "He had a wreck, maybe. Say, Poke——" A rifle bullet kicked rock dust into Bedford's face and his Springfield spat viciously. His bolt clacked. "Shoot over to the edge of those rocks, there! See him?"

Poke Warner was swearing. "Naw! Oh, damn the cuss, I can't keep the blood outa my damn eyes! Damn the—"

Wham! His Winchester boomed. "Look out, Ranger! Duck!" A smashing hail of jacketed lead beat over them, hammering the car, flinging up splashes of sand and rock powder. Poke Warner's voice roared in alarm. "It's a machine gun! Why, the lousy sons! Stung me again, Jim, we gotta git outa here! They got us by the britches!"

Jim Bedford's Springfield was barking savagely. He saw a hand fling up from behind the edge of the pile of rocks and drop back, out of sight. From somewhere in the center of the mass of rocks came an answering blast of bullets, smashing into the car. It was an automatic weapon firing, evidently a sub-machine gun.

"Got one of 'em I think, Warner! Hear me? We can't stay here. Listen! Load your rifle. When I yell you start shootin'. I'm going to run over to the right there and see if I can't chase 'em back. Cover me when I start."

"I gotcha, boy!" Poke Warner's voice was approving. "Wait a minute now, lemme stick some shells in. Wait a minute! Now! All right, I'm ready!"

Jim Bedford's Springfield barked twice more and he came snaking back from under the car, reloading his magazine, crouching against the rear fender.

"All right! Crack down, Poke! Spray 'em!"

Poke Warner's Winchester began to bark at top speed. And bending double, Bedford hurled himself out and away from the car, across the road, running like mad in a long diagonal to get to the west of that clump of rocks.

A yard high fountain of sand sprang up in front of him as he ran, something whirred past with a buzz like an angry yellowjacket. From the rocks burst a rattling spatter, like a pneumatic riveter. Sand spurted all about the Ranger's flying feet, something like a sticking, freezing mass of mushy ice, a giant snowball, struck him a stunning blow in the side, sending spurting streams of shuddering, icy cold through every vein and nerve. He stumbled, caught himself, plunged desperately on toward the poor shelter ahead, reached it and went down in a diving plunge, breaking his fall with the butt of his rifle.

Hugging the ground, head down, Jim Bedford heard the whine of another burst from the sub-machine gun stabbing the air just above him, striking the rock behind the hollow and screaming off in ricochets. Cautiously he ran an exploring hand inside his shirt, down along that wounded side. The side was numb. But his fingers, exploring, discovered that the bullet had merely sliced along just below the ribs, cutting a shallow gash. Not at all serious. And he was now in position to give that gunner plenty grief!

Carefully, Bedford raised his head, sliding his Springfield forward, raising the muzzle. He caught a glimpse of what looked like a hat brim. Instantly his rifle began to blaze and the hat leaped in air. Bedford jerked the last smoking, empty shell out of the chamber, started to cram in a fresh clip, and above the crash of Poke Warner's rapid firing, heard the crash of more

distant rifle fire, a hot battle breaking somewhere in or around the pipeline station.

Chapter IX

A CANNON!

POKE WARNER'S rifle abruptly had fallen silent. A bullet crackled over Jim Bedford's head, he spotted the flash of the hidden weapon in the rocks, swung the muzzle of his Springfield and blazed back, three shots in rapid succession. Poke Warner began to shoot again, with lightning rapidity, whooping like an Apache.

From their vantage point in the rocks, three men leaped up and plunged wildly backward toward cover behind. One of them was carrying the stubby "Tommy" submachine gun, firing back across his body as he ran, in a twisted, sideways fashion. With a grim smile Bedford swung his Springfield. Leading the running gunner as he might have lead a flying duck with a shotgun he squeezed the trigger. The machine gunner leaped high in air, doubled and went sprawling into a crevice, out of sight. Not pausing a second in his flight, one of his companions scooped up the fallen gunner's weapon, did a headforemost dive to the left and vanished, evidently into an arroyo or ditch on the other side of the rocks.

Poke Warner had left the shelter of the wrecked car and was charging recklessly, straight toward the rocks, shooting and yelling as he went. With a wild yell he flung his rifle up, turned his head toward Bedford and pointed back, keeping straight on. Up on his own feet and starting a dash toward the rocks, Jim Bedford cast a quick glance to the rear and then he too shouted joyously.

Far back, on the crest of the hill over which they had come hurtling in Bedford's car, another auto, a dingy red machine had come into sight and halted. Men were piling out, running down the road toward them, spreading out in a long, thin line. Leading them was the gaunt figure of Sheriff Jeff Henderson.

Almost together Poke Warner and the Ranger reached the clump of rocks. Behind it was a narrow gully, perhaps six or seven feet deep, leading in the general direction of the big tanks west of the pipeline station. The machine gunner was sprawling where he had fallen, but his two companions had vanished. A splashing fire was being directed at the clump of rocks from a small, frame building, evidently a toolhouse or something of the sort, the nearest of the station buildings, but still two hundred yards or more away.

It was obvious that a battle was going on in the pipeline station, with the Clarkson gang evidently cornered in the pump building and the Ortega gangsters under cover in the tool house and in an adjacent, somewhat larger building, palpably an office.

The road southward passed within fifty feet of the big, sheetiron and cement building housing the pumping machinery. The black truck was perhaps a hundred feet or more up the road from the station and quite obviously wrecked for keeps. Half hidden against the side of the tool house Bedford could just see the rear of another car, probably Ortega's machine, and it was from this building that the heaviest fire was being directed against the pump building.

The ground about the station was wet, where the station crew had evidently been turning a hose on it, to lay the dust, just before the Clarkson gang came running in. On the west side of the pump building and right against it was a water tank, atop a low, wooden platform. From this side of the building the ground sloped up to the storage tanks perhaps a hundred yards away. But there was a somewhat smaller, working tank not more than fifty yards west of the building.

Peering over the top of the sheltering rock, Jim Bedford could see where the oil pipelines came thrusting up out of the ground to curve and go into the pump building, a whole line of big bends along the west side of the structure, lines from the tanks, the big line coming in from the field to the northward, the line leaving the station and going on southward.

DROPPING back, Bedford turned to his companion. "Looks like we might be able to get closer along this ditch," he declared. "Yeah, and it also looks mighty like Brother Ortega's got himself caught between the frying pan and the fire."

"Yuh want to wait for the sheriff and his gang to git here? I sorta reckon it wouldn't be——"

There came a heavy, thudding roar from the direction of the pipeline station, a crash, a wild yell. Interrupting himself in mid-sentence Poke Warner whirled and scrambled wildly up to glare over the top of the rock. "Good, Jumpin' Jupiter!" he shouted amazedly. "It's a cannon, Bedford! They're usin' a cannon!"

The Ranger had clambered up beside him and stared. Curling back over the top of the tool house was a cloud of smoke and from both tool house and office was coming a wild, triumphant yelling.

"It is a cannon, I tell yuh!" Poke Warner was vastly excited. "In that shed! They're a shootin' a cannon from in there."

A dry twinkle came into Jim Bedford's gray eyes. A bullet whipped by overhead, causing Poke Warner involuntarily to duck, he fell against the Ranger's shoulder in the process and the Ranger caught him, holding him up. "A cannon? That's the army and navy you was asking for, ain't it, Poke?"

"I tell yuh it is a cannon!" Poke Warner insisted. "Don't git sarcastic! Them hellions got a cannon down there, the cannon that pipeline station keeps to shoot holes in oil tanks should they catch fire. The dang thing was prob'ly stored in that shed and they're usin' it! They'll bust up a million dollars worth of machinery with them big balls! Aw—don't tell me yuh never heard that oil tank farms keep a cannon on hand!"

Bedford nodded. He was recalling a little oddity of oilfield preparedness. On many oil tank farms and pipeline stations where oil is stored a real cannon, generally of the old Civil War, muzzle loading variety, is kept for the curious purpose of fighting fire.

When a huge oil tank catches fire it may, if left alone, burn for a day or longer. And at the same time, to say nothing of the tremendous loss of valuable oil going up in smoke and flame, the burning tank may be a terrific danger to surrounding tanks and property. Generating a furious heat as it blazes in the deep, high tank, the burning oil may suddenly "boil over" and hurl a deluge of liquid flame in every direction, with results that can easily be imagined.

But if holes can be cut in the bottom of the tank sides while it blazes on top, the oil will gush out into the earthen, fireguard depression which encircles each tank and a large part of it may be saved by hastily pumping it out before the fire in the tank spreads down to cover it. And at any rate oil burning in a shallow, earthen pond is a great deal less dangerous than burning in a high tank.

Naturally nobody is going to be fool enough to try to walk up to the side of a burning tank and cut holes by hand. But solid shot, fired from a cannon at a safe distace, can make gorgeous holes. And old cannons have played just that part, many many times.

Such a cannon Rand Ortega and his men must have found in the tool house and brought into play. But what they were shooting at and what they expected the old gun to do with only solid shot and black powder for ammunition, Jim Bedford could not understand. True the big, iron balls could do a lot of damage to the pumps and other machinery in the pump building. But as far as damaging Diamond Clarkson or any of his men was concerned it looked remarkably like trying to use a steam hammer to swat flies.

IT WAS Poke Warner who solved the puzzle. Just as the old gun thundered again Poke Warner leaped upward as though he had been stung by a wasp. "Come on!" he screamed wildly. "Good Gosh, come on! Ortega's gonna burn his way out! Look at them radius bends!"

For an instant Jim Bedford still stared. Then, with a shout of amazement he whirled, waving furiously for the sheriff and his posse, far back up the road, to come on in a hurry and then he too bounded over the top of the rocks, leaped recklessly down into the ditch beyond and went racing up it, after Warner. Screaming bullets from the office building tore the air above him as he ran.

Rand Ortega, far from being a fool in using the old cannon so fortuitously placed to his hand, was instead employing it to execute an amazing, a desperate coup. At point blank range he had fired the old cannon at the line of oil pipes coming out of the ground to go through

holes in the wall into the pump building. The first ball had missed but had smashed the supports of the water tank, bringing down a flood of water. The second ball, better directed had smashed that row of connections wide open, letting loose a dozen spurting floods of oil. And toward that oil somebody in the tool house was hurling flaming, gasoline drenched faggots. Let one of those hurtling, flaming torches connect with that flooding, brown fluid and Clarkson and his men in the pump house would be swept out in a twinkling by a flood of molten flame, burned to death or, if they escaped into the open, shot down at point blank range.

Chapter X

HELL!

A HELL of rifle and revolver firing had broken loose ahead. The ditch-like gully up which Warner and the Ranger were racing was turning straight past the office building, providing a perfect channel of fire for somebody in the building—and that somebody was using it!

Poke Warner staggered, caught himself and half-turned, starting to scramble out of the gully. From somewhere ahead came a high pitched, wailing war cry, incredibly savage, the battle cry of Rand Ortega. Poke Warner, head and shoulders out of the ditch, shouted wrathfully, hurled himself up onto the level ground and began to shoot, charging straight forward. Plunging up and after him, Jim Bedford saw a whirling cloud of boiling smoke sweeping toward him from the base of the pump building. Waves of running, liquid flame already were racing around the nearest corner of the structure, there was a horrid screaming coming from somewhere inside. Rand Ortega had succeeded in his effort to fire the oil.

South wind, stiff and gusty, was whirling the black, felty smoke in already blinding masses. The running figure of Poke Warner just ahead was suddenly obscured, then Bedford himself was running madly through the first waves of the heated, choking blackness, held close to earth by the sweeping wind and the curving inequalities of the station grounds. Ahead liquid fire, a combination of blazing oil and running water that only served to help carry and spread the flame, was running in streams all around and into the pump building.

Poke Warner screamed, a raging battlecry, and flung up his Winchester, shooting as he ran. Longer legged and years younger, Jim Bedford was now only an arm's length behind the Magnus officer. It seemed that nobody was shooting at them now. Rand Ortega and his men were charging, racing through the flame and smoke along both sides of the building, yelling and shooting like fiends. Waves of liquid fire were hurling the desperate, blinded Clarkson men out of the building like rats out of a sinking ship and as they emerged Ortega and his men were shooting them down.

A streamlet of flaming oil, dashing up a solid wall of rolling smoke, went pouring across the station yard, into the road. There was a roar of a motor, the black car which Bedford had glimpsed behind the tool house hurtled away from its protecting wall like a bullet, whipped left, tore through the fence and bounded wildly into the road, racing southward. It was by the danger before the burning oil stream had slid across its path and as it roared past the pump building, the machine gunner in the rear seat cut loose wide open with his chattering weapon, pouring a burst point blank into the building.

Sprinting, Jim Bedford was ahead of Warner, running now past the tool house. A crouching gunman was firing from the doorway, his face above his blazing guns contorted with killing rage. He plunged out of the doorway as Bedford raced by, whirling, firing both guns at the flying Ranger. His left gun missed, the jacketed ball from the right gun smashed through the magazine of Bedford's rifle, disabling it, all but wrenching the weapon from the Ranger's grasp.

Hurling his disabled Springfield straight at his enemy, like a flying warclub, Jim Bedford went clear into the air in a twisting leap, his hand gun jumping into his fingers while he was still off the ground. Poke Warner, somewhere back in the smoke screamed warning, the gunman in the doorway doubled up like a jackknife, ducking the thrown rifle and twisted to shoot again —and the Ranger's revolver and Poke Warner's Winchester crashed together. The gunman went down.

FED by the smashed, belching pipelines, rushing torrents of burning oil were by now all about the pump building, spreading fast across the water drenched ground.

Bedford leaped a line of flame, leaped another, turned sharp to avoid a blazing pool and dove headlong through the smoke, down the east side of the building. The devil's rattle of the submachine gun, firing from somewhere on the road south of the station, told grimly of the reception some poor devils must be getting as they came out of that inferno and somewhere in the blinding, choking, black madness, somewhere much nearer there was the crash of guns and a continuous, horrible screaming. The inside of the building was a blazing hell, fire running all over the cement floor, the doors and windows belching smoke like giant chimneys, and the heat was searing.

An eddying wave of flame lapped out in the Ranger's path, pouring toward the road, and he shied around its curving front like a startled horse. Rolling, feltlike smoke, a vast cloud of it, swept about him and in from the left came a plunging shape, driving fiercely, blindly against the Ranger, crying out in surprise at the impact. Bedford struck out on the instant with his revolver, felt it crunch against bone and flesh. Screaming rage and pain, the other man struck back savagely, tried to leap away. Bedford caught a glimpse of his face through the smoke and with a roaring cry of ferocious satisfaction, tore into him. The other man was Roy Clegg, the gunman whom Bedford had kidnapped and who had escaped after the killing of Deputy Frank Stilwell.

Screaming defiance, Clegg leaped like a panther, back into the smoke and as he leaped his guns were spouting fire. His first shot slashed Bedford's left cheek just as the Ranger's own gun thundered reply, once, twice and then the gunman was reeling grotesquely in his tracks, his convulsive fingers emptying his automatics blindly into the air and the ground. Both of Bedford's bullets had gone straight home.

Dying as he dropped, Clegg staggered, started to pitch forward, right into the fire. And springing forward, Jim Bedford caught him, jerking him back, hoisting him up as though the gunman had weighed no more than a doll, twisting about and running to get away from that pouring, flaming death. And emerging from the smoke, he stumbled right into the windup of the fight.

Fifty yards south and slightly west of the point where the Ranger came out of the smoke with his burden and paused to gasp for air, a gangster was kneeling with a leveled Winchester against his shoulder, waiting undoubtedly for the last of the Clarkson gang to come out. Just behind him was a small cottage, one of the dwellings used by the pipeline station employees and over on the road, perhaps fifty yards more to the east and south of this cottage was the black car. The machine gunner in this car was out on the ground, lying flat and firing back up the road, evidently at the sheriff and his posse just arriving or possibly at Poke Warner. And somebody in the smoke and flame all around the south end of the pump building, somebody was shooting and yelling horribly.

The kneeling gangster with the rifle whipped the muzzle of his weapon about, covering Bedford and for just an instant he stared, puzzled no doubt by the fact that the Ranger was carrying Clegg's body and so uncertain whether to shoot. That pause ruined him, for the revolver still gripped in Bedford's right hand lashed out a streak of death, the bullet striking the rifleman squarely in the center of the forehead.

BEDFORD laid the body of Roy Clegg down, turned to race into the blazing area again, toward that screaming gunman. The machine gunner in the road whipped up to his feet and jumped for his car, firing from the runningboard. Out of the corner of his eye Jim Bedford saw running figures leaping through the stream of burning oil across the road. It was the posse. Fully twenty yards ahead of his men, old Sheriff Jeff Henderson, hatless, his clothing smoking, was charging recklessly right down the middle of the road, a gun in each hand, whooping and racing straight toward that machine gun.

Bedford started to turn that way. Then he sensed a great figure come driving at him out of the smoke and flame. Instinctively Bedford flung himself straight at this new enemy. A pistol

thundered, the roaring flash almost in Bedford's face, the powder grains stinging his neck, his flying arms closed around an insanely plunging, fighting man, a big man. Then right against Bedford's ear his antagonist screamed —the wild, screaming challenge of Rand Ortega.

Over they went, head over heels, locked tight and fighting like enraged grizzlies, the Ranger hanging desperately on, taxing every muscle to match that furious, superhuman strength of the giant in his grasp. Ortega was screaming like a madman. He had knocked Bedford's gun out of the Ranger's grasp with a blow that would have felled an ox. Simultaneously Bedford's left hand had caught Ortega's right wrist, holding the giant's gun away from him.

They rolled, perilously close to the spreading edge of a burning pool of oil, its murderous heat lashing at them. Momentarily the Ranger was on top. Ortega jerked furiously, trying to free his pistol hand. Bedford's grasp slipped, the side of his palm smashed excruciatingly against the hammer of the automatic, discharging the weapon into the ground. The slide kicked back and the big gun went flying from Ortega's hand. Instantly he had jerked his hand entirely free and was tearing with jagged fingernails at Bedford's face and eyes.

Falling sideways, Jim Bedford saved himself from splashing down into burning oil only by a tremendous effort. He twisted like a flash, started to fling himself away from the blazing death and lunge once more at his foe, ten feet away. Ortega had rolled and come up to his feet. He whirled, screamed like a mad beast, his huge hand whipped with blurring speed to his belt and out again. He crouched then sprang like a giant tiger. In that huge right hand was a knife with an eight-inch blade, ten times as deadly in a hand to hand fight as any revolver

BARE handed, the Ranger had not one chance in a hundred to avoid that blade in the murder skilled hand of the charging giant and he knew it. Burning oil was right behind him, he could not leap back. In a desperate, furious effort he tried to hurl his body sideways, to miss that lunging blade. For an instant he succeeded, plunging to the right and forward, away from the pool of fire behind, out of Ortega's path, the tip of the giant's knife just missing him as he dodged. Then the desperate intensity of his frantic effort betrayed him, he was off his feet, flat on the ground sprawling full length—and Ortega had stopped, whirled and was plunging back.

Knowing that it was hopeless, Jim Bedford tried to roll, to get to one side or at least to twist face upward to meet his enemy. He saw another great, roaring figure come leaping through the flame; twenty feet away, Ortega, too, saw and stopped. Whirling he hurled his knife, a darting streak of silver flame. The new figure dodged the knife and charged. Screaming his maddened challenge, Rand Ortega leaped, a magnificent leap, ten feet or more, clear over Bedford's prostrate body, falling forward on hands and knees as he landed and scooped up his automatic from the ground. The gun was spouting death at the new opponent before it was six inches off the ground.

Jim Bedford was on his knees. Before he could get to his feet the newcomer, a blond giant, his clothes burning in a dozen places, his blood covered face a murderous mask had plunged past him, charging straight into Ortega's belching gun, roaring as he charged. He stopped as though he had been struck with a sledgehammer and, dropped in his tracks.

"Damn you!" Ortega shouted. "Damn you, Clarkson, I've got you, I've got you!"

A wave of black, fighting madness seemed to sweep over Jim Bedford's brain, he leaped crazily forward; Ortega flung the emptied automatic straight at him, whirled and was running toward the road. In split second, kaleidoscopic flashes the Ranger glimpsed the man whom Ortega had addressed as Clarkson striving to get to his feet, saw old Sheriff Jeff Henderson pounding wildly toward him through a break in the rolling, black smoke, saw Poke Warner shooting rapidly as he ran in from the left.

Ortega was racing toward the black car, still waiting in the road and the machine gunner crouching against the fender was shooting madly, trying to hold back the oncoming forces of the law until his boss could reach the car.

Bare handed, mad with fighting rage, the Ranger was running after Ortega, fifty feet behind him but gaining fast.

The machine gunner by the car spun sideways, dropping his weapon and pitched into the dust. With a hysterical scream his companion at the steering wheel shot the gas to the car, sending it hurtling down the road in mad flight, abandoning Rand Ortega to his fate. Shrieking an impotent command after the car to wait, the running giant doubled in his tracks like a deer, hurdled the fence, snatched up the submachine gun and swung, at bay.

How he got there Bedford never knew but as Ortega swung, the old sheriff was charging recklessly right toward the maddened gangster boss, not twenty feet away. The sheriff's guns, the stubby weapon in the hands of Ortega thundered together and the sheriff dropped. Then the Ranger was plunging the last ten feet, closing hand to hand with the giant again. Oddly, as he came in, Bedford heard the gun in Ortega's hands click futilely on an empty chamber, heard Ortega snarl. Then they had come smashing together, breast to breast. They were down, in the dust of the road and it was only after a second or two that Bedford realized Ortega was making no resistance.

RUNNING feet were pounding up all around them. The Ranger heard old Poke Warner's shouting command, "Turn him loose, Jim, git away from him! Turn him loose, I'll kill him if he makes a pass!" Bedford twisted free, swayed up to his knees, gasping. Gripping hands helped him to his feet. Fighting for breath, Bedford stared through blurring eyes down at the giant on the ground, saw him raise himself on an elbow. For an instant Ortega cursed them, raving like a madman, then he dropped back. And lying there in the dust, his dead face was the face of a wild beast.

"Dead!" breathed somebody harshly. "All over! Say, Ranger, sheriff wants to talk to yuh, quick! He's passin', Ortega got him."

Wavering in his tracks, Jim Bedford turned. "Where is he? Some of you guys drag those bodies away from the fire. There's one there—one over by the side there." He gestured vaguely. "May be some of 'em alive. See about it Poke. Now where——"

Twenty feet back up the road and just against the fence, the sheriff was lying, his head supported on a posseman's knee. The whole front of his shirt was wet with blood and a second posseman, tearing the shirt open, was clumsily trying to stop the bleeding. As Bedford knelt beside him the sheriff irritably waved this helper's ministrations aside. "Bedford," the sheriff whispered, "Bedford, listen to me, quick! I got to tell yuh! That guy Ortega killed in the yard there is Ben Gregory!"

"What! Why, Ortega called him Diamond Clarkson! Did you know Clarkson was——"

"No. I didn't know, Ranger. I just seen his face when he fell. He's Ben Gregory, Bedford, the missin' heir. Is —is Rand Ortega dead?"

"Yes. You got him, Sheriff. Clegg's dead too."

A faint smile crept across the old officer's gray face. He tried to sit up but could not. Failing, he twisted his head to look into the face of the cowboy who supported him.

"Step—away a minute—will yuh, Oscar?" he whispered. "Want to tell—Bedford somethin'—private."

Obediently the posseman got up. The Ranger bent close. "Wait a minute, Sheriff," he objected. "Better let us stop that bleeding before you try to talk."

"Nev' mind." Sheriff Henderson's voice was just a whisper. "I'm—done, Jim. Wanta go out—now."

The old officer's voice was fading fast. Just a ghost of a whisper now, but pleading. "Lemme die and—be buried a free man—will yuh, Ranger? Don't—tell nobody I was a convict. Nobody but Ortega and Clegg—knowed it!"

Jim Bedford bent his head. "I won't tell, Sheriff."

The glazing eyes smiled. "Much—obliged, Jim. That's—all I reckon. I tried to—make up——" A curious expression, almost of peace came over the gaunt face and Sheriff Jeff Henderson closed his eyes. When he died, an hour and a half later, without regaining consciousness, the faint, tired smile was still on his lips.

Over in the station yard, just south of the blazing inferno around the pump

building, Poke Warner was hurriedly helping the man whom Ortega had called Clarkson and whom the sheriff had named Ben Gregory away from the danger zone. The blond giant had been painfully dragging himself away from the spreading flame unassisted, so very obviously he was not dead. A posseman was staggering out of the smoke with Roy Clegg's body on his shoulder and a couple of the pipeline station employees had come out of their hiding places and were running, evidently to shut off the smashed lines. Across the road a wide puddle of blazing crude had spread, effectually blocking any real pursuit of the black car and the lone gangster who had escaped.

Chapter XI

OIL MILLIONS!

PERHAPS three hours later Texas Ranger Jim Bedford, his face, hands and side bandaged, sat in a chair in the front room of one of the pump station cottages. Behind him, leaning against the wall was Poke Warner, the Magnus officer. On a cot before the Ranger a third man was lying, propped up with pillows, a giant of a man with blond, tousled hair sticking out above the white bandages that all but covered his head and the whole upper half of his body.

"You say you are Diamond Clarkson?" Jim Bedford's voice was very quiet. "Sheriff Henderson identified you as Ben Gregory."

The giant on the cot stirred. "Yes?" His voice was harsh, noncommittal. "Clarkson's my name."

The Ranger made a gesture. "Several of the posse identified yuh as Ben Gregory, old Chick Gregory's missing son, hombre. Want me to call 'em in?"

For a long moment the man on the cot was silent. Then he shook his head. "No," he said quietly. "I reckon yuh needn't."

Jim Bedford nodded, bent forward. "Gregory," he demanded, "what were you and Ortega fightin' about? Was it you that killed yore father and brothers?"

Again the man on the cot was silent for the space of two long breaths. Then when he spoke his low, grating voice had subtly changed to a level, dead monotone. "It was Rand Ortega that had my dad and brothers killed. Yuh needn't take my word for it. Yuh can prove it—now."

The Ranger nodded. "What were you and Ortega fightin' about?" he reiterated. "Tell yore story, Gregory. I"—he paused, then went on in a slightly changed voice, "Gregory, you kept Ortega from stickin' a knife in me and whilst I don't know whether yuh did it on purpose or not, I appreciate it just the same. I'll do what I can for you. But I'm a Ranger. And I got to warn yuh, anything yuh tell me I may have to use against yuh. Now then—do you want to tell yore story?"

It was Poke Warner who impatiently broke the silence. "Aw hell!" he snapped. "Gregory, if yuh don't tell Bedford the whole truth, yo're just crazy! Don't yuh know yo're at least half heir to a twenty million dollar fortune?"

A grim, little smile flickered for an instant in Ben Gregory's bloodshot eyes. He shook his head. "No," he said very softly. "I'm not the heir to anything. I'm Diamond Clarkson, outlaw. The heir to that twenty millions yo're talkin' about is a two-year-old girl down in Chihuahua. She's the daughter of my murdered partner, Dan Packard."

FOR a long moment it was very still in the little room, the two officers staring at the man who had just denied his identity as heir to a giant fortune. The portion of Diamond Clarkson's face visible above the bandages twisted queerly, a sardonic, mirthless smile flickered an instant in his smoke reddened eyes. In a low, harsh voice he began to talk.

"Yuh knew Dan Packard and me were accused of robbin' a post office up here and killin' the postmaster? We didn't do it, so we busted out of jail and run off to Mexico. Down there we did turn outlaw. Dan is dead now but that post office charge is still hangin' over me, yuh know that."

Jim Bedford's gray eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute!" he interposed. "You mean, you think you're still wanted for that post office job?"

"Why, yes!" Gregory's tone was puzzled. "Don't yuh know?"

The Ranger glanced at Poke War-

ner. "Well, I'll be damned!" said Warner amazedly. "Hell, Gregory, don't yuh know——"

"A guy named Carlett confessed to that robbery and killing six months ago!" finished Bedford. "You and Packard have been cleared for six months."

Surprise, bewilderment, then grim, sardonic amusement followed each other in rapid succession across Ben Gregory's bitter face. He began to laugh, a hard, barking laughter. "Double crossed! So Sti—my friend did double cross me! He wrote me——"

"If it's Frank Stilwell yuh mean, he's dead," put in Bedford. "Deputy Buck Farrell says Roy Clegg killed him with his own gun when Clegg thought Stilwell was tryin' to double cross him."

"Clegg prob'ly killed him to keep his mouth shut," said Gregory harshly. "I thought Frank Stilwell was my man, savvy? I knew he was in with the sheriff. I was paying him to tip me off."

"And he lied to yuh about that post office charge bein' still over yuh?" asked Warner interestedly.

Gregory nodded. "He wrote me not a month ago that I was still wanted by the law. But, yuh know, he'd tipped me off four or five times when Ortega was having a load of booze come over and those tips were straight. He must have been double crossin' both sides——"

"—and got hisself killed for it," finished Poke grimly. "Serves him damn well right!"

"Yeah," cut in Bedford softly. "Go on with yore story, Gregory."

"Dan and I did turn outlaws in Mexico," Ben Gregory took up his story. "We changed our names, of course. Dan called himself Valdez. I called myself Diamond Clarkson.

"Then Dan married a little Señorita. Never told her his real name or what he was, but he tried to settle down and go straight with her. She was a straight kid, see, fine family and Dan, he—well he sort of kidnapped her to marry her. And then just a year after they'd got married she died in childbirth. Dan took his baby girl down to her grandmother and left her all the money he had and then he come back to me. I was over in Sonora then, robbin' trains."

For a moment Gregory fell silent and it was obvious that his mind now had come to grim, bitter memories. Slowly he went on.

"Three months ago Packard was murdered, shot in the head while he slept. I found out who done it, or rather who had it done and it was Rand Ortega, a Border hopper, a stranger to me. He was a big shot, see, runnin' booze, smugglin' yellow boys across, stuff like that. But I was a pretty big boy myself so I started in to make Ortega pay for killin' my partner. And I found out Ortega was doin' his damndest to wipe me off, too."

AGAIN the man who had frankly admitted himself an outlaw was still. The two officers, watching his face, sensed instinctively that his mind was passing over many dark memories that he did not voice, memories of battles, of treachery, murders in the dark, the merciless warfare of two outlaw chieftains, each trying to destroy the other.

"Things happened." Gregory's voice was very low, harsh. "Ortega come up to Death Creek and fixed up the Death Creek Line. He even bought the sheriff somehow—I don't know how he did. I didn't dare come out in the open up here in Texas but I went after Ortega every way I could.

"I've never robbed any honest folks up here and I've never killed any honest ones but we've given Ortega and his damned killers hell!" Gregory's voice was hard, defiant. "I know that won't excuse me. Even hijackin' liquor trucks and killin' booze runners is robbery and murder in the eyes of the Law, I reckon. We tried our damndest to get Ortega, too, but we never could. He was always too fast with his guns and he kept too many bodyguards."

"Yuh wanted to kill him that bad?" asked Warner.

Gregory nodded slowly. "He gave me reasons," he said quietly and in his voice there was an infinite bitterness.

"Go on," commanded Bedford.

"I didn't have no idea what Ortega's real game was. Of course I knew about old Brazos Packard's money but I'd heard Brazos left it to my dad if Dan and me didn't claim it—and Dan and me couldn't come up here and claim nothing without bein' sent to the chair, we thought. I thought it was just a

grudge fight between me and Ortega—until last night."

The Ranger bent forward quickly. "And last night?"

"Last night I learned what it was all about. We made one of Ortega's killers talk. He told me about Joe, my brother, gettin' killed and also that Clegg and a gang had—got my dad. We made him talk some more and he told me Ortega had everything lined up to get the Packard money. Said Ortega would rub me out before morning. Ortega had a man waiting down in Mexico who was going to come up and use fake documents to prove he was my dad's half brother. Just a cat's paw for Ortega, savvy? Rand had everything fixed up in Patrick County so this fake heir would get the money and then Rand would get it from him."

Ranger Jim Bedford's gray eyes narrowed, almost imperceptibly and he nodded slowly. Ortega's strange scheme had been daring. But it might very well have worked, had it not been for old Sheriff Henderson's conscience. Dan Packard dead, all the Gregories killed by unknown enemies, a new heir putting in his appearance perfectly able to prove that he had had nothing to do with the Gregory murders—and Ortega in the background, with a bought Law to smooth the way for his puppet "heir." Yes, it might very easily have worked.

RAND ORTEGA had played for gigantic stakes. The thing that had tripped him had been the simple fact that old Sheriff Jeff Henderson had been willing to give up his own life and liberty for the sake of his friends.

Ben Gregory was silent. After a moment Jim Bedford spoke.

"As I understand it, old Brazos Packard's will actually leaves half his estate to you and half to this daughter of Dan Packard's," he explained slowly. "Ortega didn't know about this daughter, I gather?"

"No," said Gregory dully. "He didn't know about her. But she gets all the money. I don't want it."

"Yuh don't want it!" gasped Poke Warner. "Ten or fifteen million and yuh don't want it? Why, my Gosh, hombre——"

Ben Gregory had turned his face to the wall. "No," he repeated in a tired voice. "Ten or fifteen millions wouldn't do me any good in the penitentiary—or the electric chair."

THE daring break, three weeks later, whereby Ben Gregory, the elusive "Diamond Clarkson," transported himself from the Death Creek hospital to the shadows south of the Rio Grande was through no fault of Texas Ranger Jim Bedford. But the big Ranger did feel a distinct sensation of relief when Poke Warner brought the news.

"Personal, I'm glad he's gone," declared Warner stoutly. "I was gittin' to like that hombre too much to admire seein' him in the pen. And the Mexicans sure wanted him bad, don't forgit!"

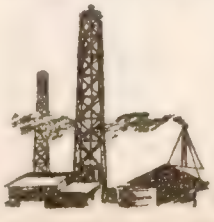
Jim Bedford said nothing. Ben Gregory, the last of the Gregory tribe, had assigned all his claims to the Packard millions to the baby daughter of Dan Packard, his dead partner.

It seemed that Poke Warner was reading the silent Ranger's thoughts. Grinning, the veteran Magnus officer reached for his plug of tobacco, bit off a generous chew.

"I reckon, Bedford," philosophized Warner, "that hombre figured he'd ruther be free than rich. Looks that way, huh?"

Jim Bedford smiled. "Don't know as I blame him," he drawled. "Do you?"

COMING IN WEST SOON



more OIL FIELD stories

by

FOSTER-HARRIS

Aug. 20-30

EASY DOES IT

by George C. Henderson

Author of "Diamond Cut Diamond," "Triggernometry," etc.

They said that "Easy" was as easy as his dad, but they were wrong!

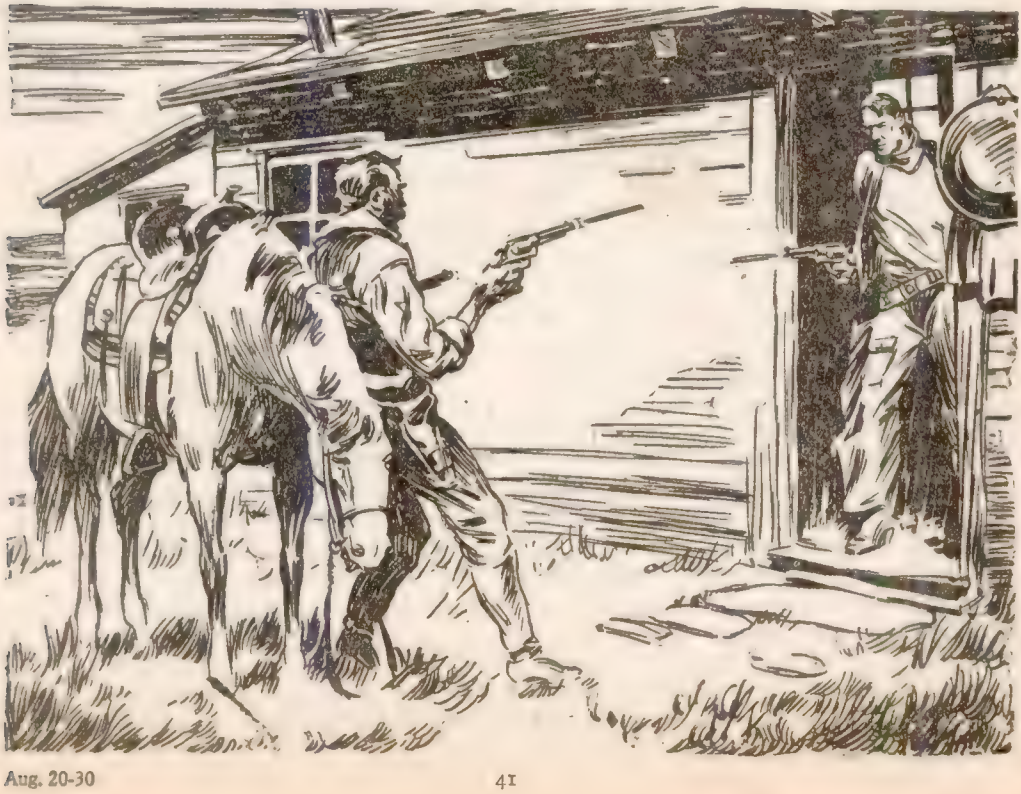
EASY JORDAN twisted his neck, ran a rope-burned finger around the saw-tooth edge of his stiff collar and glanced from the newly made grave at the side of the U Cross ranch-house to the little crowd that was slowly breaking up at the conclusion of the funeral.

Through the open door he could see his gaunt, gray-haired old mother surrounded by the sympathetic women folks. "Ma" Jordan's life had been a cruel one. Not a neighbor had set foot inside her door in eighteen years. Easy's father, Clint Jordan had been responsible for that. Home folks did not approve of the crew of hard-boiled gunfighters that Clint always maintained, nor of his reason for keeping them. The U Cross had become so bad eight years before that Ma had coaxed Easy to go over into New Mexico on her brother's horse ranch to work until he got a little older and more experienced.

"Wait until my boy grows up," she kept telling herself. "He won't let them treat me like this."

But the good people of the Sierra del Norte country only smiled and shook their heads. Easy was a chip off the old block. He'd never amount to anything, either. Blacky Quinn would domineer over Easy just like he did over Clint. Blacky was the U Cross foreman.

Easy shifted his lean, lanky frame against the porch pillar and looked down at his freshly greased boots as people began to file out of the house. The men passed him with a careless nod or a lift of the hand, as if to show how little



they thought of him, and then traipsed off down to the hitchrack to tighten saddle cinches and get spring wagons and buckboards ready to move. The funeral of the late unlamented Clint Jordan was over and these people were leaving, not again to set foot on the U Cross in friendship until there was another burial or the reign of the Blacky Quinn gang was broken.

Easy ran a big muscled hand through his thatch of corn-silky hair and turned his gray eyes lazily toward the corral beyond the bunkhouse. Like so many black crows, five men perched there on the top rail of the horse pen, smoking and nodding and talking to each other in low tones. All were clean shaven, their hair was plastered tight to their scalps, they wore dark store clothes and not a gun was in sight, yet this was Blacky Quinn's gang of gunfighters that had ruled the U Cross roost with the consent of the weak-spined Clint Jordan and had made the name of the ranch a bad by-word in a rangeland noted for the honesty of its ranchers.

"And now I've got to tell these hombres they're fired," mused Easy Jordan.

Inside the house he heard a woman crying but it was not Ma. Her face was bleak and hopeless and her faded old eyes were sunk far back in her head, with dark circles showing beneath them, but she did not shed a tear or utter a sob. Long suffering had drained all emotion out of her and left only a husk.

A rancher down by the hitchrack bellowed: "Come on, Sary. I cain't hold these creams in much longer." Big-bosomed women emerged chattering from the house, with squalling youngsters hanging to their skirts. Most of them did not even glance at Easy.

A big, black-bearded man came out with the preacher, passed Easy over with a contemptuous glance and saw the people off with an air of proprietorship. This was Blacky Quinn.

A motherly, middle aged woman with a babe in her arms came over to Easy and held out her hand.

"I've heard good of you, Easy," she said, bluntly. "They tell me you are an honest boy. I hope you'll have courage enough to assert yourself." And turning her back squarely on Blacky Quinn she flounced down the steps and out of the yard to the place where a prancing team of creams threatened to run away, with the buckboard.

EASY met his mother's questioning glance and then shifted to Blacky Quinn's sardonic features. There was a glint of contemptuous amusement in Blacky's smoky brown eyes.

"You be a good boy, now, Easy," jeered Quinn, "if you want the ladies to like you."

Ma Jordan glanced at her son. Now was the time for him to let Blacky Quinn and his gangsters know that he, Easy, was boss of the U Cross. Easy's gray eyes clashed with Blacky's smoky brown ones but he said nothing, and it was Ma who finally spoke.

"I reckon you-all know what to expect from me," said Ma, frowning. "I won't need you and the boys no longer, Blacky. Yo' c'n get yore time now."

Blacky regarded the old woman with a tolerant, humorous expression. "Then we're fired?" he asked.

"I allow you'd call it that," said Ma, crisply.

Blacky rolled a cigarette before he spoke.

"You cain't do that, ma'am," he said softly. "Y'see Clint made us boys podners in this yere rancho more'n five years ago. Every hand on the place would take oath to that. You cain't nowise fire us off."

Ma Jordan cast a helpless glance at Easy, but her son had turned away and was looking at his father's freshly covered grave. With a gesture of surrender she turned slowly and entered the house. Blacky sat down on the porch, pulled out his knife, picked up a stick and began to whittle.

"Come over here, Easy," he said after a moment without looking up.

Easy's face flushed at the tone of command but he obeyed and sat down opposite the foreman. Blacky began to flip his knife so that it landed with the point of the blade sticking in the wood floor of the porch. He let Easy wait fully two minutes before he continued.

"We really don't need any more hands, Easy," said Blacky Quinn with a well assumed air of honest frankness, "but you bein' who you are, I mought put you on. Do you reckon you could get along with the boys without makin' trouble."

"I figger I could," responded Easy, docilely. "As long as yo' said pap done give you-all podnerships, I don't see that I c'n do nothin'."

Blacky Quinn got up briskly and moved toward the bunkhouse. At this the five members of his crew dismounted from the fence as if at a signal.

"That's talkin' sense, kid," Blacky called over his shoulder. "I don't figger that you and me's going to have any trouble."

Easy avoided his mother's eyes as he entered the house and went to his room to get back into his more comfortable range clothes. At supper he caught her glancing at him with an expression that was heart-breaking in its hopelessness. For years she had dreamed of the day when the U Cross ranch would turn honest again, when the terrible blot of Blacky Quinn's occupation would be lifted and once more she could meet her neighbors on the old friendly terms. She had placed all her hopes in Easy and now he had failed her.

After breakfast next morning Blacky Quinn reported to the ranch-house for orders as if nothing had happened. He was tolerantly friendly toward Easy and even allowed him a certain respect.

"What's orders for today, Mister Jordan?" he asked of Easy. "I figgered sendin' two of the boys into the East brush country. Moe is still busy cleanin' out water holes. Somebody's got to shove the stock off Big Meadow, which I'm saving for the hosses. I got nobody to ride the west line." His attitude was completely changed from the day before.

"I'll ride the west line," volunteered Easy, promptly.

He did not look at his mother as he walked with Blacky Quinn down to the horse corral where the men already were roping out their mounts for the day and saddling them. Blacky was jovial. He introduced Easy to the boys as the "boss," but took no pains to conceal the broad wink that denied the words.

"Dab yore rope on that blaze-face buckskin, Easy," he suggested.

Easy dropped a rope over the mustang's head and clawed up to him hand over hand as the beast began to snort wild-eyed and pull back. He was conscious that the hands were watching him and it made him alert. Blacky's gunfighters expected something to happen.

SUDDENLY the buckskin reared. Eyes dilated, sharp-shod hoofs uplifted, beautiful shiny body contorted, it uttered a savage squeal and struck downward at Easy, just as the latter leaped aside.

A shout of glee went up from the other cowboys.

"Better run fer it, kid," yelped one. "Look out or he'll pat you on the head," howled another.

Easy paid no heed to them, he was approaching the horse slowly, talking to it in a quiet, soothing tone. The trembling buckskin ceased to plunge but was watching him now with flattened ears. Easy coaxed and pulled and drove him outside where his saddle lay on the ground. A rider on a snubbing horse, seeing that Easy intended to saddle the wild bronc, pulled the buckskin's nose across the withers of his own mount and held him there, while young Jordan slipped on the hackamore and fastened the ends of a blindfold under the cheek straps.

The buckskin fought the saddle, swelled up when Easy tried to take up the cinch and nipped at him and kicked, while the other cowboys whooped and howled at Jordan's antics in jumping out of the way. They fell silent when Easy pulled his gloves up tight, set his hat firmly on his head and gripping the reins tightly, swung into the saddle. The snubber jerked away the blindfold.

For a moment the buckskin just stood there, head tucked between its knees, blowing loudly and trembling all over. Then suddenly it plunged into the air with its backbone bent into a crescent, whirled and came down headed in the other direction. The jarring impact knocked the breath out of Easy. His head was reeling and the twisting movement seemed to have torn loose every ligament in his body. Dark streaks were shooting before his eyes, yet he hung on as the frenzied bronc went twisting across the field, bucking at every jump, landing stiff-legged with a pile driver effect that caused blood to spurt from the cowboy's nose.

For the next few minutes Easy Jordan put up the best bucking horse ride he had ever made in all his life, because he knew that it meant death to fall off. Blacky Quinn had steered him onto a killer! The buckskin bronc had been ruined by cruel riders until it had turned

man-killer. It slashed at him with its teeth. It tried to brush him off against fences and buildings. And finally it deliberately tried to fall on him after a series of snake-like contortions and pin throws. It sunfished and fell. Easy jumped clear and threw himself at the killer's head before it could get up. He was badly battered and shaken. His face was covered with blood. But his voice was cool and commanding when he called out: "Hey there, snubber, git over here."

As he jerked his saddle and bridle off the buckskin and saw the disappointed expression on Blacky Quinn's face, he realized that this had been no joke, but an attempt to kill him. And it would not be the last. Blacky's gang for some reason had decided that it would be better for everyone concerned if an accident happened to Easy Jordan.

As Jordan rode the west side that morning he kept a sharp lookout for ambush. He followed the trail that had been beaten hard by the hoofs of line riders long since dead, watching carefully for the sign of cattle that had drifted across, but he saw not a single hoofmark. There was reason enough for that. To the westward lay only a dreary, waterless, grassless area which would tempt neither man nor beast. Gradually it dawned upon Easy that this line did not need riding; that Blacky had got him to ride it so as to get him out of the way.

Easy had intended to play along until he got the goods on Quinn's gang; then enlist the authorities in a fight to oust them, but now he decided that immediate action would be necessary. Blacky was too clever. He would never let Easy live long enough to get any evidence.

THAT evening Easy rode off toward Wolverine without a word of explanation to Ma Jordan or Blacky Quinn. When he returned late that night and stopped at the bunkhouse for a few minutes he was talking to himself and everybody else. Such was his condition that he left his copy of the Wolverine paper, *The Nugget,* on one of the bunks and vigorously cussed out the man who yelled after him to tell him so. He reeled across the moonlit ranchyard, almost yanked a gate from its hinges, stumbled over a long-eared hound and then walked into the presence of his mother as straight and sober as a judge.

Easy was just finishing breakfast the next morning when Blacky came storming in with a mutilated copy of the *Nugget* gripped in his hand.

"Red Lynch and Charley Lyon skipped out last night," growled Blacky, throwing the *Nugget* on the breakfast table. "That leaves me short handed. It's all account of the damned lies published in that ding-whistled paper. Look at it."

The *Nugget* was a four page, tabloid-size sheet, called by courtesy a newspaper because it contained legal notices, the registration of brands, weddings, marriages, deaths and price quotations on cattle. Therefore the banner heading across the front page was the more striking by contrast. It read: BIG GOLD STRIKE. And beneath it set in large black type was what purported to be a despatch telling of the discovery of rich gold deposits in Bear Trap Gulch, about a hundred miles across the Sierra del Norte mountain range.

"Red and Charley stampeded!" raved Blacky. "They didn't dare tell me. They didn't even wait to collect their pay. They just sneaked away and I know they are headed for Bear Trap Gulch."

"Now ain't that hell," drawled Easy Jordan; but he was thinking. "Two from six leaves four. It's only four to one now."

Easy loafed around the house all day. He was pretty badly stove up from the bucking horse ride, so he contented himself with cleaning up all the old firearms around the place, including his own forty-four six-shooter, after which he got out the tally books of the ranch and went over them carefully. He checked these records up against the duplicate cattle inspection certificate and then he began to understand why his father had been able to maintain such a large crew on such a small ranch. He understood why Blacky Quinn and his gang would not let themselves be fired. According to the records the U Cross cows had been giving better than 100% calf crop, in spite of all the laws of nature to the contrary. Blacky had kept Clint Jordan under this thumb and had used his ranch as headquarters while he stole the surrounding cattlemen blind!

"Crazy Horse" Miller, who had been put to the job of shoeing horses, came up from the blacksmith shop to tell

Easy that he had run out of plates. Crazy Horse, also known as "Loco" because of a wild, glary look in his eyes, thought he ought to go into Wolverine for more shoes, but Easy saw that this was only a subterfuge. Miller wanted to find out more about the gold strike at Bear Trap. Easy was on the point of refusing permission when a sudden thought struck him.

"All right, Crazy Horse," he agreed. "And I'll ride in with you."

Crazy Horse did not think much of that idea but he could not very well say so. He was intensely relieved on arrival in Wolverine when Easy left him to go over to the courthouse, giving Crazy Horse a chance to make a bee-line for the American Eagle saloon.

EASY rode up to the courthouse and tied his bronc in front of the jail. Sheriff Cole Jackson was asleep with his feet cocked on his desk. He greeted Easy sourly. Wolverine folks did not have much use for Easy Jordan. He was too shiftless, they said.

"I got a disagreeable dooty to pufform, sheriff," said Easy. "I got reason to believe one of my men has gone plumb insane."

"Well if it's Crazy Horse Miller, he ain't got fur to go," growled Jackson. "What do you want me to do?"

"What do you generally do with crazy men?"

"Well, if they get violent, I send them down below to the asylum. Is Crazy Horse violent?"

"Yes, he is," said Easy Jordan, with the utmost gravity. "He's gone plumb bughouse. He imagines there's a big gold discovery over in Bear Trap. That's all he c'n talk about. I tell you, Cole, I'm plumb a'scared to have him around."

"You would be scared," said the sheriff, scathingly. "I ain't takin' no man to the asylum on your say-so," he continued, disrespectfully.

"Come and see for yoreself," suggested Easy. "Crazy Horse is over at the American Eagle and I bet he's ravin' right now."

After some argument Cole Jackson reluctantly lowered his feet, pulled his hat down over his eyes, shifted his gun and followed Easy to the American Eagle bar. As Easy had predicted, Crazy Horse Miller was waving a glass of liquor in the air and orating at the top of his voice to a growing crowd of listeners. He caught sight of Easy.

"Here comes a feller that will stand up for me," he said. "Easy, these gents don't believe me. They say there ain't no gold strike at Bear Gulch."

"Well is there?" asked Easy, carelessly.

Crazy's glazy eyes widened. He took a step toward Easy and there was menace in his tone.

"Looky here, kid!" he roared. "Don't you try to razoo me. You seen it in the paper, the same as me. BIG GOLD STRIKE, it said, right on the front page of the *Nugget*. Didn't Red and Charley stampede? Ain't Blacky sorer than hell?"

Sheriff Cole Jackson edged his heavy body between Easy and Crazy Horse and stood looking at the wild-eyed puncher, much as a cowboy would regard a doodlebug before drowning it with tobacco juice. He studied Crazy Horse up and down and fore and aft and twisted his face up into a comical expression.

"Hold up," he said, sharply. "You claim this yere story come out in the last issue of the *Nugget?*"

"I do. I seen it. How do you get any call to horn in?"

Sheriff Jackson slowly drew a dirty hunk of paper from his pocket and glanced at the date-line. Then he spread it before him on the wet bar and jabbed at it with a black finger nail.

"This is that same issue o' the *Nugget,*" he said, slowly. "Kindly point out that there gold rush story."

Crazy Horse glanced at the paper. He burst out swearing. This was not the latest *Nugget*. The one he had seen was different. It had a big headline clear across the top. Blacky had seen it. All the boys at the ranch read it.

"And Easy knows it too," snarled Crazy Horse, trying to dodge past the sheriff to reach young Jordan.

COLE JACKSON moved. One hand shot out and jerked the gun from Crazy Horse's holster. Dropping it as if it were hot, he caught Miller's wrists, pulled them behind him and planted his knee in the small of his captive's back with a force that rendered Crazy Horse entirely helpless. Before anyone knew it, Crazy Horse was handcuffed and was leaping and

tearing around as if to justify his name.

"This yere feller's gone insane," said Sheriff Jackson, as the crowd gathered around demanding an explanation. "I'm sending him down below to the asylum."

Before leaving town Easy Jordan went over to the office of the Wolverine *Nugget* and handed the editor twenty-five dollars in gold.

"Guess that's the record high price to pay for one paper," said Easy, "and especially since I destroyed that paper after half a dozen people read it. But I reckon it's cheap enough considering it prob'ly saved my skin. I had six guns against me to start. There's only three left. I'll have this fight cut down to my size yet."

Easy rode lazily over to the blacksmith shop and loafed while the smith got together the plates for him. As he blew smoke through his nose he smiled and the horseshoer, seeing it, watched him askance. Everybody said that Easy was a "little teched in the haid account his Ma was scared by a rattlesnake afore he was born," and now the blacksmith was inclined to believe the gossip.

Carrying the shoes Easy rode at a canter toward the U Cross. The rutty trail twisted through patches of bitter sage, skirted white gypsum dunes, passed through a vast area of mesquite that looked like a well-ordered fruit orchard at a distance and came out abruptly on a sandstone mesa in view of the straggly frame and adobe structures of the U Cross headquarters.

Easy halted on the mesa rim and studied the country below with his glasses, long and carefully, before he dropped down onto the floor of the valley. He realized that trouble might start at any moment now. Blacky Quinn would not be long in understanding that Easy had tricked him.

He watched the ranch buildings anxiously to detect any movement but saw no one except the Chinese cook squatting on the shady side of the cook shack peeling potatoes. He left the horse shoes at the blacksmith shop and rode straight for the house, a sudden feeling of uneasiness about his mother coming over him.

She met him at the door, but there was no joy in her eyes. She was serving him just as she had served his father, hopelessly, dumbly, unprotestingly, as one who understands the fixed and unchangeable character of her men folks.

Easy had an impulse to take her in his arms, to tell her of his plans and to bring blessed tears into those tragic, dry eyes, but he restrained himself. If she knew, she would understand the extent of his peril. Her fears for him might betray him. She was not good at deceit.

"I guess you know we've lost three men," was all he said.

"I knowed Red and Charley went with the gold rush stampede," replied Ma. "Who was the third?"

"The sheriff arrested Crazy Horse and is going to send him below," answered Easy. "Crazy Horse went insane in the American Eagle saloon."

She received the news in silence, but a little later as Easy was indolently repairing a hair bridle she picked up a double barreled shotgun, broke it, looked through the barrels and burst out with sudden savagery: "Only three left now! Why I could most whup them myself."

When he had finished fixing the bridle, Easy put on his cartridge belt and gun and called a terrier pup to him. The pup bounced up and down in front of him like a rubber ball that had solved the secret of perpetual motion.

"Where yo' goin' now?" asked Ma as he started for the door.

"I figger to get some brush rabbits," replied Easy.

"Huh!" snorted Ma. "Yo' won't git no brush rabbits with that forty-four. Better yo' take the scatter gun."

Easy merely grinned at her, shook his head after the manner of the Jordan men-folks, as if it was too much effort to talk, and rode away toward the uplands, with the yipping terrier pup popping in and out between the mustang's legs.

FIVE miles of steady climb brought Jordan to the red dirt of the foothills, where greasewood and salt bush gave way to scrub oak and manzanita and where the brush was almost impenetrable in spots. Suddenly the terrier gave an excited series of yips and wriggled on its belly into a thicket. Easy swung his bronc around so he would not have to shoot over its head and became keenly alert.

A blue streak darted out of the brush, headed for another thicket not five feet away. Easy's forty-four six-shooter described a swift arc. Flame and lead spat

from the muzzle. The "blue dick" turned a somersault and lay still. Easy swung down and fought off the terrier which already was gnawing at the clean-drilled rabbit head.

It was beginning to get dark when he missed his first shot and decided to quit. He had six little blue rabbits in the gunny sack that hung from his saddle horn. When fried brown, they were as tasty as any quail.

Instead of taking the homeward trail Easy turned toward a cowpath in the direction of the TTT ranch, urging his mustang to a lope. As he topped a rise and the TTT ranch buildings came into view, he suddenly reined in. A party of horsemen were spurring swiftly toward him. There were four men and two carried rifles across their saddles. He recognized Jess Wickam's iron gray even before they were close enough for him to recognize Jess's chunky figure and heavy, sand-colored features. Jess was owner of the TTT. It was his wife, Sarah, who had challenged Easy, at the funeral, to assert himself.

"What the hell's all the pistol shootin' about?" jerked out Jess, regarding Easy coldly. "I thought it was a gunfight. Sary's sick and yore danged noise has got her so excited——"

"I shore am sorry," said Easy, contritely. "I jest got me a few blue dicks up in the manzaniter." He patted the red-stained gunny sack. "If Sary's sick maybe she'd like a nice fried rabbit."

Jess Wickam ignored the suggestion. He was gazing at Easy with a suspicion that gradually turned to amazement. His three men moved in closer, their faces expressing their incredulity.

"Where's your shotgun?" asked Jess. "You didn't——"

"Oh yes I did," interrupted Easy, grinning. "Ol' forty-four brung home the bacon."

"You mean to say you shot brush rabbits with a forty-four?" burst out one of the TTT punchers.

"Why? Is that agin' the lawr?" retorted Easy.

"Goddlemighty!" gasped Jess. "You must be a gunslinger from way-back. They ain't nobody around here c'n wrangle a hawg-leg thataway."

Easy said nothing. He merely looked at Jess, who shifted uneasily in his saddle. The TTT cowboys did not know whether to believe him or not. Shooting blue dicks in the brush was fast work even with a shotgun. The open places in the brush were so narrow that often all the hunter could see was a blue streak about two feet long as the game darted from one thicket to another.

"Where you headed for?" asked Jess, in a more respectful tone.

"Your place," said Easy, shortly. "I wanted to know if Ma could stay at the TTT for a spell. Course I'd have to tell her you needed her account of Sary bein' sick. Ma's pinin' herself to death. She needs to git away from the U Cross for a couple of days."

Jess frowned. He was wondering what the other range folks would think if he took Ma Jordan into his house. There was a universal boycott against the Jordan outfit and every member of the U Cross spread, but everyone sympathized with Mrs. Jordan.

"She'll be welcome if she comes alone," said Jess curtly. "I'll send a buckboard for her and I'll bring her home. I don't want any U Cross trash settin' foot on my ranch."

And with that he wheeled his horse and rode away followed by his men.

COAL oil lamps were casting a yellow light through the windows of the U Cross ranch-house when Easy rode up. He stripped his gear from the tired mustang, turned the horse loose and then came striding over to the house carrying his saddle and the sack of rabbits. Four dark figures dotted the steps of the rickety porch. Three sat in a row. They were Blacky Quinn and his two gunmen, Steve Ellis and "Runt" Corn. Ma stood in the shadows opposite them.

Not a word was spoken as Easy clumped up the steps past them, tossed his saddle in a corner and followed his mother into the kitchen. Ma asked no questions as Easy ate his belated supper, but her eyes widened as she saw the sack of rabbits and then glanced at her son's only weapon, his revolver. When she had finished serving him she took her station by the screen door and kept an eye on Blacky and his men.

"By the way Ma, I forgot to tell you I saw Jess Wickam," said Easy. "Sary is sick and he wanted to know if you could come over for a day or so. I tol' him mebby. He's sendin' a buckboard over this evenin'."

"He c'n send it right back again," said Ma, dryly.

With a toothpick sticking between his teeth Easy got up from the table, picked up the sack of rabbits and started through the door. He felt a hand on his arm. Ma was looking up at him. It was the first bit of affection she had shown him since his home coming.

"Where yo' goin', son?" she asked.

"Down by the crick to clean these yere blue dicks," replied Easy. "I'll hang 'em up in the spring house and they oughter keep a day or two."

"I'll 'tend to that," said Ma.

"No, I'll do it," said Easy.

Ma snatched the sack from Easy's hand and threw it into a corner.

"I'll clean them rabbits," she said, harshly. "I'm still boss of the U Cross ranch."

Easy joined the men on the porch. He noticed that all three wore their guns, although it was their habit to leave them at the bunkhouse on coming up to the headquarters building. He remained standing as he poured tobacco into the brown paper, deftly rolled the cigarette with one hand, cracked a match-head with his thumb and applied it to the crimped end of the cylinder.

"What happened to Crazy Horse?" asked Blacky Quinn. "Yore maw told me he was arrested for goin' insane. But how come?"

"He got to ravin' in the American Eagle bar," explained Easy, smoothly. "Cole Jackson seed he'd gone plumb out'n his haid and tuk him in. Guess pore Crazy Horse is due for a trip below."

"Guess he ain't," snapped Blacky. "Miller's a good man. I'm ridin' in tonight and get him. I've lost two men a'ready. I just cain't let Crazy Horse go."

Easy stiffened slightly. His right hand dropped so that the thumb was hooked over his belt above his gun. Did Blacky suspect him? If he did it meant a showdown. The men were uneasy or they would never have worn their guns up here to the house. If Blacky went to town he would discover Easy's trick. He too would be willing to swear that he had seen that BIG GOLD STRIKE headline in the *Nugget*. If Easy tried to stop him, it meant instant fight and Easy was not yet ready for gunplay.

"All right, Blacky," he said, carelessly. "I 'lowed to git another man in Crazy Horse's place, but you bein' foreman are doin' the hirin'. Reckon you'll have a hard time with Cole Jackson. He probably sent Miller off on the afternoon stage."

"Then I'll go after the stage," snarled Blacky, as he went off to get his horse.

Steve Ellis and Runt Corn sauntered after Blacky and entered the bunkhouse with an elaborate show of carelessness. Easy sat down on the porch with his back to the wall and let his eyes wander lazily over the restful scene—the ranch buildings bathed in moonlight, the broken-down rigs in the yard, the round horse corral and in the distance the dark foothills rising gently tier upon tier until they merged with the vast bulk of the Sierra del Norte mountains.

Ma came out with her rocking chair and began to rock back and forth. Blacky rode away. After a time the buckboard from the TTT arrived to be promptly returned by Ma, who resolutely refused to leave the ranch. Whinnying and kicking sounds from the horse corral aroused Easy from his reverie. Runt Corn was in charge of the horses and they should have been driven down to the lower pasture long ago.

SHIFTING his gun slightly, Easy sauntered down to the bunkhouse. Through the window he could see Steve playing solitaire while Runt sewed a button on his pants. Disarmed by this peaceful appearance he relaxed his vigilance slightly as he entered the place and stood looking at Runt.

"Ain't you runnin' down them horses, Runt?" he demanded.

Runt finished sewing on the button and bit off the thread before he answered. Even then his reply took an unexpected form. One hand jerked from under the pants on his lap and leveled a six-shooter at Easy. The gun was cocked and the range was point blank.

"Set down, boss," suggested Runt, with a sarcastic grin. "Set down or there might be a accident, with me and Steve both to swear that you was shot by your own weepon when you dropped it."

Easy sank onto a bench. He had calculated his chances and saw there was nothing else to do. Runt would not hesitate to shoot him at the first false move.

Steve took his gun and resumed his game of solitaire.

"Blacky don't trust you none," volunteered Runt. "We got orders to keep you under our eyes until he gits back from Wolverine. Looks like you been up to some funny business in town."

Easy made no answer to this and Runt continued: "I don't want there to be any hard feelin's, Easy. Sposen we have a little three-handed poker game while we're waitin'?"

Easy assented. Steve got a new deck of cards from his bunk and produced a box of chips. He took out all the low cards up to fours. It was to be penny ante. Easy lost from the first. His mind was on Blacky Quinn. Blacky would come raging back here soon and hard telling what he would do with Easy unarmed and helpless.

A footstep grated in the gravel. Runt's gun came up, focused just above the table on Easy. "One false move and I'll drill you," he warned, his voice a bare whisper. "If it's somebody looking for you, tell them it's all right."

A shadow fell across the doorway. Then the lamplight glinted on the twin orifices of a double-barreled shotgun.

"Easy! Are you in there?" demanded Ma Jordan's voice.

"Shore," drawled Easy. "Just havin' a little game with the boys. What is it, Ma?"

The shotgun vanished. Ma stood in the doorway looking at them suspiciously, disapprovingly. Some of the life went out of her eyes. She had thought that Easy might be ready to make a fight. Now he was hobnobbing with men she knew to be cattle thieves, playing cards with them on the friendliest terms.

"Who's drivin' out them broncs?" she asked, sharply. "Yo're jingler, ain't you, Runt?"

"Yes, ma'am," admitted Runt, uneasily. "I'll git out with them broncs as soon as I play a hand or two."

Ma gave a disgusted snort and departed. The game continued. Little by little Easy edged his chair toward Runt, who was at the end of the table. Steve was directly across from Easy. Runt leaned back and gave Easy a level look.

"Move that cheer back where it was," he ordered, "and no more funny business." With a sheepish grin Easy acknowledged his defeat by moving his chair away, but even as he played his cards he was on the lookout for his chance. He noted that both Runt and Steve kept their guns in their holsters where they could reach for them instantly, but that Steve had carelessly placed the captured forty-four on the floor beside his chair.

THE kerosene lamp at the end of the table began to burn low. Runt pushed it nearer the center and turned up the wick slightly. Easy touched it once with his fingers as he made a swift pass in dealing the cards.

A drum of hoofbeats reached his ears. It sounded from the direction of the Wolverine road. It was Blacky Quinn riding hell-bent to take vengeance on him for his trickery. Easy had to do something. He must act quickly now. Blacky might kill him on sight. He could expect no mercy from the enraged gangster.

Steve threw a significant glance at Runt, who nodded his head. They, too, had heard Blacky approaching. The steady drum of hoofs told them that he was riding at a terrific pace.

Easy braced his foot firmly against the table leg. His hand flashed out as he picked up his cards. There was a crash of breaking glass, the rending of wood as if the table was being torn apart and the bunkhouse was plunged into darkness. As he gave the table a terrific shove, Easy lunged to the floor and snatched at his own gun where it lay beside Steve's chair.

His fingers closed over the walnut butt and a calloused thumb snapped the hammer to full cock. A finger of fire leaped out of the darkness. Easy fired at the flash, rolled aside and fired rapidly again as two more blasts filled the air with an intolerable din. He was crouching in a corner against a bunk, gun extended in front of him, eyes searching the darkness. A path of yellow moonlight lay across the floor. Something dark dropped into that path. It was a body. It fell to the floor with a thud. Easy saw Runt's face as the head lolled toward him and he knew the gunfighter was dead. Sight of it evidently unnerved Steve for he suddenly spoke.

"Don't shoot!" he pleaded. "I give up. You winged me. You got Runt."

He staggered into the light with his hands up. Easy was on top of him in an

instant lashing his hands behind him with a piggin' string. Blood dyed Steve's shirt sleeve below the elbow and he groaned as Easy tied his arm, but this was not time to be squeamish. Outside Easy saw a rider spurt into the yard. He leaped clear as his horse went down, run to death. It was Blacky Quinn.

Easy popped out of the bunkhouse and crouched there, plugging shells into his old forty-four. Blacky came running forward, a gun in each hand.

"I got you covered!" rapped out Easy.

Blacky's guns rose. Upon Easy's ears beat that infernal din. Before his eyes, lances of flame pricked the gloom. He saw Blacky's thick figure sway, heard his sobbing oath and realized that he, too, was shooting automatically, coolly, with deadly effect.

A dull blow on the arm made him drop his gun. It did not hurt, but when he tried to lift that arm, he could not. His gun was gone and he could only stand here and be killed by the cursing, black-bearded outlaw who was plunging closer and closer. Blacky was laughing. His great mouth was open! He was laughing shrilly! Then he pitched forward on his face and lay still.

Easy went over and looked down at him. His body felt numb. He stood there stunned and uncomprehending until he felt a touch on his arm. Ma was looking up at him. She was reaching up her arms. They closed about his neck and she buried her face in his shoulder and burst into tears. At last she could cry. That terrible, dry, tearless agony that had held her for an eternity was broken.

"Oh my boy," she sobbed. "My son." Her fingers touched his sleeve and came away wet. She glanced up at him, startled "You are hurt!" she cried.

"Now ma, it's only a scratch," said Easy Jordan. "You git back up to the house and let me look after these gents. I'm boss of the U Cross ranch now."

Slivers Cassidy!

You know him! You like him!
You want him back!

HE'S COMING
IN
WEST
SOON

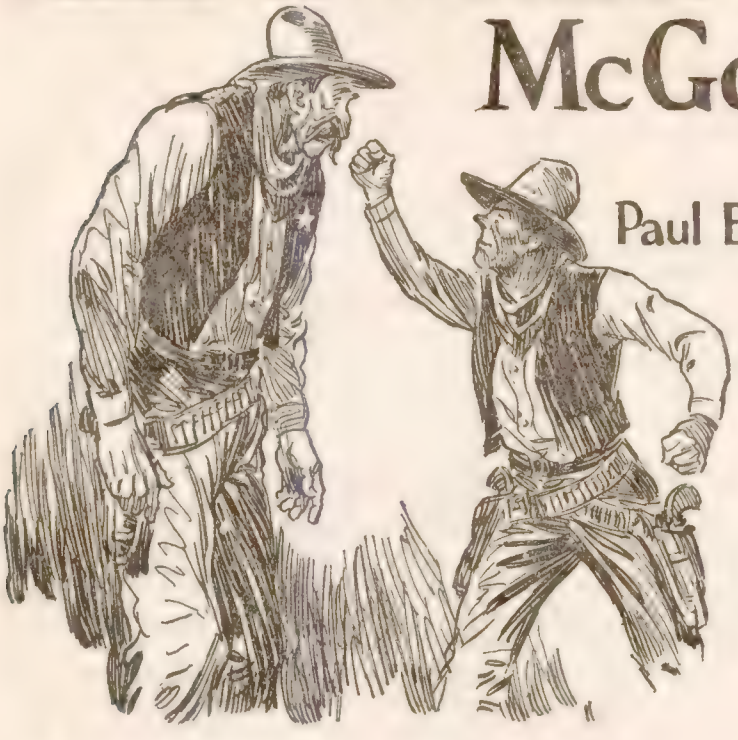
"Cassidy Carries Cash"
and how!

a long novel by
FREDERICK J. JACKSON

Aug. 20-30

HELL-ON-WHEELS McGORGAN

by Paul Evan Lehman



Hell shore come on wheels an' every other way when McGorgan hit town!

DEPUTY Sheriff Jake Nails poked his huge head through the doorway of the large main room of the Travelers Retreat and surveyed its occupants thoughtfully.

A whale of a man was Jake, with sandy hair and beetling brows, and a bushy, tobacco-stained beard. In appearance he was as hard as his name; but in appearance only. As a matter of fact he was as soft as a woman's hand and afraid of his own shadow. He was honest, in a way, but diplomatic with it. He wanted to keep peace in the community, but he also wanted very much to live. Therefore, he toadied to both the law-abiding ranchers in the outlying districts and to the bad element in the town itself, until his authority had wilted to the point where any gesture on his part was treated as absolutely meaningless.

Having finished his survey, Jake propelled his immense frame through the doorway and lumbered across the floor.

Scarcely a glance was given him as he made his way to the bar. At the sound of the impressive baritone with which he delivered his order, however, a smooth-faced, immaculately attired man who had been absorbed in a game of stud at a nearby table, raised his head quickly, then pushed back the chair in which he was seated and arose to his feet. With a low word to his three companions, "Smoke" Quigley stepped softly to the side of the big deputy.

"Are you looking for me, 'Rusty'?" he inquired.

Nails started and nearly dropped the glass he was about to raise.

"Why — uh — no, not partic'lar, Smoke," he stammered. "I—I didn't even know you was here."

"No? Well, I had hoped you'd drop in," said Quigley. "I have a little question to ask you. I understand that you've sent to the sheriff for help in cleaning up this end of the county. Is it true?"

Nails squirmed uneasily. "We-el, Smoke, you see it's thisaway. The ranchers hereabouts are kinda whisperin' that this here hotel o' yore's is just a hangout for the outlaws that's raisin' all the sand around here. They—they even say that yo're the ringleader, and responsible for their missin' cattle, stolen payrolls, and stuck-up banks. Remember," he hastened to add, *"I* ain't sayin' it; *they* are. Some o' them has been complainin' to the sheriff, and he's been on my ear askin' why I ain't done

nothin'. I told him like I'm tellin' you that I ain't never been able to get any evidence ag'in you, and he allows that mebbe a stranger could do what I can't. So he's sendin' a special deputy over that ain't known."

With a hand that was not entirely steady, Jake raised the glass to his lips and downed the contents.

"I heard that you told Tom Givens you'd sent for a man," persisted Smoke.

"Hell, no," declared Jake emphatically. Then as though sensing doubt in the other's unwavering scrutiny he hastened to amplify. "We-el, mebbe I did tell Tom I done it; but you know how that is, Smoke. I gotta stand in with them ranchers if I want to keep my job. But it's like I told you; I didn't send for no one."

This time his eyes met those of Quigley; and Smoke, observing, nodded slowly. "I guess that's straight, Rusty," he said. "It better had be. Now tell me, what is this jasper's name?"

"Seems to me it was Mac somethin'," answered the deputy, scratching his head as though trying to remember. "Yeah, it was. McGorgan is the name—'Hell-on-Wheels' McGorgan, he called him."

"Hell-on-wheels, eh?" mused Smoke. His eyes narrowed and the thin lips drew back in the half snarl that somehow stamped him the ruthless outlaw he was. "Well, that's where he's going, Rusty, if he interferes with me. Right to hell on wheels. And when is this bender due to arrive?"

"I reckon he's likely to show up any time now," replied Nails.

For half a minute Quigley studied the deputy with probing eyes. Quite abruptly he turned and walked away.

JAKE finished his drink slowly, downed another, then with a wave of his big paw, waddled out through the doorway.

Quigley had reseated himself at the table, and from there watched the big deputy until Jake disappeared from view; then pushing the cards and chips to the center of the table he abruptly terminated the game. His three companions looked up at him with varying degrees of surprise reflected on their faces.

"Cash in and come back into the office with me," ordered Smoke. He arose, flashed an unspoken command to the barkeeper, and strolled toward a door in the extreme rear of the room.

The bartender in turn cast several meaning looks toward widely scattered tables, and after each a man arose and made for a seemingly predetermined station. One slipped through the front doorway and seated himself on the north end of the verandah; another left by a side door to take his station on the railing where he could watch the south approach; a third disappeared toward the rear of the establishment beyond which stretched the waste land, interminable miles to the west. And close to the hand of each, yet so inconspicuous as to escape the notice of the uninitiated, depended a piece of cord with a wire loop dangling at its visible end. Each string found its way through devious passages in the wall to the room at the rear of the barroom, where it connected with a small bell, mounted upon a spring. Thus was Quigley constantly in touch with the outside world even to the extent of knowing from just what direction trouble was approaching.

Inside the room, "Curley" Wolfe, dark and ill-featured, growled a question. "What's the idea, Smoke—game gettin' too fast for you?" There was insult in the tone, and both hands were hanging loosely, fingers only inches away from the butts of a pair of heavy six-guns.

Smoke eyed him coldly, lips slightly curled in contempt. "No," he answered evenly, "it wasn't. I called the game because I've got something definite about this fellow who's coming down here to clean up. Rusty Nails told me he's due at any time now."

Wolfe spat disgustedly. "If that lump o' lard told you anything, it's likely a lie. That buzzard couldn't tell the truth to save his grandma."

"He may prove dangerous some day," said Quigley ominously.

"That jelly-fish?" sneered Wolfe. "He ain't got the backbone of a wet bar rag. Why, he's asleep most o' the time."

"So is a volcano," answered Smoke tersely. "But to get back to this special deputy. We'd better sit tight for a little while."

Wolfe growled an emphatic protest. "With that there payroll comin' through? Not me! I'm goin' to get mine while the gettin's good. When this de-

tective jasper walks in, I'll meander up to him and slap his face; then when he goes for his gun I'll salivate him. That's easy."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" snapped Quigley, at the end of his patience. His voice was harsh, rasping. Even his physical appearance had undergone a startling change. The face, deceptively calm and dignified in repose, was now drawn and scowling. His eyes were frosty, the lips curled back in that snarl that was so characteristic of the man in his evilest mood. "I'm boss here, Wolfe; you'll do as I say. Savvy?"

For one moment it looked as though Curley were going for his guns; then he crawfished.

"Aw-w, all right," he acquiesced sullenly. "What do you want me to do—take him on my knee and sing him to sleep?"

"No, we won't sing him to sleep," snapped Quigley. "We'll rock him to sleep—on the bough of a cottonwood at the end of forty feet of hemp. I'm running this neck of the woods, and no Hell-On-Wheels McGorgan is going to tell me where to head in. But since we don't know this bender, I'm warning you all to sit tight until I identify him."

UP OVER the door a bell jangled harshly.

"A visitor," announced Smoke grimly; then glanced up at the bell which still swung jerkily back and forth on its spiral spring. "From the north," he added.

"Yeah," growled Curley. "From the direction o' the county seat. It's him."

"We'll find that out when he arrives," said Smoke coldly.

Above them a second bell jangled. All but Smoke started in surprise.

"From the south this time," said Quigley.

"It ain't him, then," grunted Wolfe.

Smoke's eyes were eloquent of disgust. He seated himself on a rickety chair and watched his lieutenant distastefully. Curley Wolfe was possessed of a single-track mind, and narrow-gauge at that. He had the strength of a bear, but lacked that animal's cunning. Only sheer brute strength and an amazingly quick pair of gun hands had allowed him to live this long. But the end was approaching, thought Smoke. Sure of his ability, the fellow was becoming jealous of the power wielded by Quigley. Sooner or later he would force the issue, and then one or both of them would die. Smoke shrugged indifferently and changed his position on the chair.

Above him the third bell jangled.

"What the hell!" exclaimed Curley. "If those jaspers on the lookout are foolin' us I'll skin 'em alive!"

"Don't get nervous," sneered Quigley. "One from the north, another from the south, and now one from the west. What could be more natural?" He arose and eyed them sternly. "Don't forget what I told you. I'm running this show. Hands off till I give the word. Come on."

He unbolted the door and led the way from the room.

Quigley and his men had scarcely entered the bar-room and seated themselves at a table when the swinging doors parted and a man stood outlined there. In the glow of the newly lighted lamps his features were clearly delineated.

He was large, but not awkward, round of face and ruddy of cheek, and with eyes that were neither blue or gray, Smoke could not be certain at the distance. A black Stetson hat was pushed far back on his head, revealing a tangled mat of blond locks.

The stranger swept the assemblage with a curious glance, then stepped inside.

"Howdy, gents," he said in a hearty voice, and swaggered across the intervening space to the bar. "Whisky, straight; and chuck a vinegaroon in it to give her a kick," he ordered.

Wolfe whispered hoarsely across the table. "That's him, Smoke! You want me to perforate him?"

"Wait," said Quigley shortly, rising to his feet.

He sauntered over to the bar. Wolfe immediately behind him. Smoke touched the stranger on the arm.

"Good evening," he said smoothly. "My name's Quigley; I'm the owner. You want to put up for the night?"

The other eyed him interestedly. "You Quigley, eh? Fella back the road a bit told me I'd be likely to meet up with you. Yeah, I want to get a room and grab a little shut-eye. Got a hoss outside, too."

Smoke nodded. "We can take care of you. Stable's right in back. Make yourself at home. Joe, here, will give you a room when you're ready for it."

Back at the table, Curley Wolfe turned upon him impatiently.

"Smoke, what ails you? A fool could see that's this hell-on-wheels fella. You gonna let him hang around with that payroll comin' through?"

"Wolfe," said Quigley, "you're right. A fool would see in this hombre the gent we're expecting; but a man with brains wouldn't." His voice became vehement, cutting. "You lunkhead, do you think this McGorgan would come here direct from the county seat? Do you think he'd admit having heard of me? Do you think——" He stopped abruptly, eyes on the doorway behind and almost in a line with Curley. "Look," he said in a lower tone. "Our second stranger —the man from the south—has arrived. Of the two he would be my choice."

ANOTHER stranger had entered, and behind him stood the guard from the south end of the verandah as though to confirm the direction. The newcomer stepped quickly inside the doorway and moved two swift steps to the right, thus placing the wall at his back. From this vantage point he surveyed the interior of the room with eyes that were cold and menacing.

In build he was slim and wiry, with a suggestion of alertness that was heightened by the narrow face, thin lips, and black, close-set eyes. He was wearing two guns, and the holsters were tied down.

Smoke nudged Curley with an elbow. "There's your man, Wolfe," he said. "Go ahead and shoot him; but be sure he isn't looking your way when you draw. He might beat you to it."

"Smoke, yo're loco," said Curley hotly. "There ain't *no* man can beat me to the draw. But I ain't gonna crack down on him. He ain't the man. That's the fella over there." He nodded viciously toward the bar.

"We'll see," answered Smoke shortly, moving forward to intercept the second stranger. At their approach the fellow halted and his ams crooked slightly at the elbows, bringing his tense fingers a scant inch from his guns.

Smoke smiled affably. "Howdy, stranger," he greeted. "I'm the proprietor —Quigley's my name. Want to put up for the night?"

The other relaxed slightly. "Yes," he answered shortly.

"Come far?" asked Smoke casually.

"Mebbe."

"In other words, none of my business, eh? Well, all right, friend. This is another of my guests—Curley Wolfe. Have a drink, boys."

The stranger waited until they both had turned, then followed them to the bar. He had a drink with them, bought a round himself; and all without a word.

"Stable's in the back. Make yourself at home," said Smoke genially. Together with Wolfe he walked back to the table where they joined the other two.

"Well," asked Smoke, "what do you think now?"

"Same as I thunk at first," growled Wolfe stubbornly. "I got a hunch the big fella's the jasper, and I'm playin' it to the limit."

Smoke eyed him silently through half-closed lids; then he shrugged indifferently. "Maybe we're both wrong," he said. "Number three has not arrived."

"Number three has arrove," said Curley; then laughed raspingly. "Mebbe *that's* him, Smoke."

BUT for his inherent sense of caution, Smoke might have laughed also. Certainly the stranger upon whom his eyes rested appeared to lack every attribute to be expected in a special deputy. He was undersized and wizened, with seamed, leathery face and straggling mustaches. He wore high laced boots, faded blue overalls, and a shirt of undeterminate color; while crammed over the stringy gray hair was a battered felt hat that had seen its best days ten years before. To Smoke he could belong to but one of two classes: sheepherder or prospector. Quigley dismissed him with a shrug.

"I guess the choice reverts to the first two," he said. "Wolfe picks the tall blond gent; I take the slim dark one. What do you fellows say?"

Curley Wolfe fixed his eyes on "Stub" Brent, who shifted nervously under the intent gaze. "I—I kinda think like Curley, boss," he whined.

"You would," said Smoke contemptuously: "And you, Felipe?"

The Mexican shrugged. "You haf

been right so mooch, señor, I can but agree wit' you."

Quigley nodded his approval. "We've got to lay some plan of action," he said tersely. "Wolfe, you and Stub circulate among the men and tell them to drop into the office for a pow-wow. Felipe, you stay with me."

When the other two had gone, Smoke turned to his companion.

"Felipe," he said briefly, "Wolfe is going to make trouble. I shall probably have to kill him. But sheep follow a leader, and he no doubt has a crowd ready to back his play. Go around among the men you are sure of and wise them up. If it comes to gun smoke, have them handy. Savvy?"

The Mexican nodded and turned away.

Ten minutes later as many ill-featured outlaws were assembled in the office with Smoke and Curley. The grouping was significant. Quigley and Wolfe were seated at the table, while behind each five men were gathered. They were thoroughly bad, all of them; and for that very reason exceptionally handy with a six-gun.

Smoke explained the situation briefly, knowing as he did so that most of them were already acquainted with the particulars. At the conclusion of his talk, Wolfe leaned across the table and addressed him:

"Smoke, they ain't no use beatin' round the bush. I'm gettin' sick o' yore preacher-like ways, and that sooperior air o' yores. Yeah, and I ain't the only one. You've been runnin' things with a high hand, keepin' most o' the loot yoreself and handin' out the remains to us like we was a pack o' houn' dogs. We ain't standin' for it no longer. Smoke, me and these fellas here ain't takin' no more orders from you."

For a short minute the two eyed each other across the table, Curley, rebellious and defiant; Quigley, serene, almost indifferent. When Smoke answered it was in his silkiest voice.

"I think it might be well, Wolfe, to postpone our personal differences until we have disposed of this Hell-On-Wheels McGorgan."

A murmur of approval reached Wolfe's ears.

"All right," he acquiesced sullenly. "As soon as I perforate that jasper we're through takin' orders from you."

"And which one," inquired Smoke, "do you intend perforating?"

"Why, the one I picked; the big fella."

"And if, by chance, it turns out to be the wrong man?"

"I'm gamblin' he's the right one."

"Listen to my plan." Smoke leaned across the table, and suddenly the veneer that education and an earlier contact with the finer things of life had applied, disappeared. Again the voice was rasping, the lips drawn back in a snarl. "When I go it won't be at the end of a county hangman's rope. I'm out to get this limb of the law who dares to come here to hold me to account for what I've done. We'll seize both of them, disarm them, tie them up. Then we'll put a noose about the neck of each and give the guilty one a chance to admit that he's this Hell-On-Wheels McGorgan."

Curley's eyes bulged. "Suppose he ain't got guts enough to own up?" he asked.

Quigley barked the answer through tight lips.

"Hang them both!"

The door opened—closed. Deputy Jake Nails had entered the room.

A MOMENT of paralyzed silence—the silence of astonishment. That anyone should step unbidden into Smoke's private office was in itself astounding; that the timorous Rusty Nails should be that one, almost beyond belief. It was significant that no one drew a weapon, so accustomed had they become to the apologetic mein of the peace-loving deputy. To them, as a fighter, Jake simply failed to exist.

Curley Wolfe was the first to speak. "Well, what are you doin' here?" he demanded.

Jake's eyes were wide, and the perspiration was streaming from a face that was as near white as it would ever be.

"I heard you," he answered hoarsely. "Listened at the door. My gosh, Smoke, you can't harm them fellas. It ain't right. They—they ain't neither o' them the man yo're lookin' for."

"How do you know?" snapped Wolfe.

"I—I don't. I just don't believe it, that's all. My gosh, fellas, you can't do it!"

"We can't, eh? Who's goin' to stop us?" growled Wolfe.

"Why—why, I am!" stammered Rusty.

"You are!" Wolfe's lips curled back in a sneer of utter contempt. "Why, you big lump o' lard. Stick 'em up—high!" His six-gun flew out and up, stopping at the deputy's waistline.

Slowly Jake obeyed. Wolfe secured Rusty's gun and shoved it into the hand of Stub Brent.

"Keep him covered," he snarled. "We're goin' to try out Smoke's little plan. After we get out, you come along, Stub, and lock this fat hunk o' cheese in. And if he opens his trap, tap him on the head with yore gun."

He pointed to several coils of rope hanging on the wall. "Pete, get a couple o' lengths o' that hemp."

Quigley shrugged and arose from his chair. "Come on, boys," he ordered. "Wolfe, you get your man; I'll take care of mine."

He led the way from the room.

THE little stranger in the shabby clothes had slipped into a chair near the office and was dealing a game of solitaire. No one gave him so much as a glance as they filed by. From beneath his tattered hat brim the old-timer watched them; then his gaze shifted to the little room from whence came a string of plaintive complaint as Stub, gun in hand, backed through the doorway. He swung the door shut, slipped the bolt, and followed the others toward the front of the room. Behind him the little man went on with his game.

Smoke and Curley had reached the bar, at the near end of which the big blond puncher was deep in conversation with the bartender. Curley stopped immediately behind him and became suddenly absorbed in a stud game that was under way at a nearby table. Smoke sauntered leisurely on.

The taciturn stranger stood near the end of the bar, back to the mirror, elbows on the mahogany. Smoke nodded to him, and took his stand on the far side of the fellow, making as he did so a casual remark about the weather.

At the other end of the bar came the sudden sound of commotion, and the harsh voice of Curley Wolfe.

"Up with 'em!"

He had swung about and now his six-gun was leveled at the unsuspecting puncher.

The stranger by Smoke Quigley acted with a quickness that was startling. In one quick movement he had swung down into the crouch of the gunman, facing the direction of the sound, weapons in hand.

He could have taken no better position for Smoke's purpose. With almost equal swiftness Smoke's gun leaped from its holster and came to rest, muzzle boring into the small of the other's back.

"Grab the sky!" commanded Quigley.

The two guns of the stranger clattered to the floor. Slowly he raised both hands toward the ceiling.

"Felipe, tie his hands behind him and bind his ankles." Smoke stood watching as his commands were carried out. Down at the other end of the bar Wolfe and Stub were engaged in securing the volubly cursing puncher. When the task had been finished, both men were placed side by side in front of the bar, and Quigley turned savagely to the milling crowd.

"All but my men get out!" he ordered. "Felipe, close the shutters—bar the doors."

The room cleared, he turned to the business at hand. A two-inch pipe extended the length of the room overhead, being supported by strong iron braces nailed fast to the joists. Its purpose was to bring water from the windmill tank to the bar. Smoke now proposed to turn it to a more sinister use. Deftly he tossed the two ropes over the strong support, a space of about six feet between them; expertly he knotted and formed a hangman's noose on each. Then the loops were placed about the necks of the two suspects, and at a word from Smoke they were hoisted to an upright position upon the bar.

AN EXCITED Felipe tugged at Quigley's arm. "Señor," he said, "the town is full of ranchers and cowboys. Eet look like one beeg fight!"

"Tell that gang outside to spread around the place and hold them off," snapped Quigley. "If they want a showdown, they'll get it."

Felipe departed, and Smoke turned

again to the men. He came to the point at once.

"One of you jaspers calls himself Hell-On-Wheels McGorgan. I don't know which one, and I don't much care. Whoever he is I intend to hang him. I'm giving him this chance to admit his identity and save the innocent one."

"That's not my name!" yelled the blond fellow. "I'm Ben Taylor—"

"Yo're a liar!" interrupted Curley. "I picked you the minute you walked in. Yo're this hell-on-wheels fella, all right."

"Quiet!" ordered Smoke. He turned to the other stranger. "Well, fellow, are you coming clean?"

The dark, taciturn one returned his gaze steadily, and said nothing.

"All right," said Smoke with finality. "Get ready, men. When I count three, pull them up."

At the back of the room, unnoticed in the semi darkness, the little man with the dilapidated hat slipped quietly from his chair and edged along the rear wall. Very stealthily he moved, and in the faint light that filtered to that remote part of the room glinted the barrel of a Frontier Model Colt's that he had tightly gripped in one hand.

At the front of the room Smoke was slowly counting.

"One!"

Five men seized each rope and took up the slack. Ten men, laboring under the strain of excitement and hate; two hostile factions ready to fly at each other's throats.

"Two!"

A choking sob from the big blond fellow.

Smoke raised his hand, opened his mouth to speak the final word——

Pow! Pow! Two shots in rapid succession—the tinkle of glass as both hanging lamps went dark—a babble of startled curses—a ringing voice from the rear of the room.

"Here comes Hell-On-Wheels McGorgan! Whe-e-e-e!"

Two orange flashes cut the darkness in unison, but six feet of space between them. A strangling gasp.

"He—he got me!" mumbled Curley Wolfe, and slumped to the floor.

Across from him, Smoke Quigley swayed like a tree in a gale. "I knew —I'd have—to kill you—Wolfe," he muttered thickly. Then he too collapsed.

The air reverberated to the sound of six-guns; the fumes were choking; orange streaks flamed from the end of weapons firing blindly, but only six feet from their targets. The two factions were blazing away at each other. And above it all the shrill, weird battle cry of the unknown attacker.

Guns were popping on the outside now; there were confused shouts—the tramp of many feet on the verandah flooring. Then came a great hammering on the barred door.

But inside was silence; deep, profound.

TOM GIVENS touched a match to a lantern wick, lowered the chimney, and glanced about him. Then he gave vent to an exclamation of wonder and awe.

The room was a shambles. On the floor, in every conceivable position, lay ten men, dead or badly wounded. Two were standing, one holding a blood-soaked rag to his shoulder, the other leaning against the wall nursing a shattered leg. Head to head lay Smoke Quigley and Curley Wolfe, both dead.

Amazedly the ranchers and cowpunchers gathered at the bar and gazed at the spectacle; and as they gazed, a figure sprawled out in a chair moved—pulled itself erect.

"It's Jake Nails!" exclaimed Givens. Swiftly he crossed to the deputy, shook him. "Jake, you hurt?"

Rusty opened his eyes and glanced about him. "Huh?" he grunted. "No, I ain't hurt; just stunned a bit. Gosh, ain't it awful?"

"Awful nice," said Givens grimly. "Never seen such a collection o' dead outlaws in all my born days. I gotta hand it to that hell-on-wheels fella, Jake. Where is he?"

"Yeah," said another excitedly. "Where's that little fella that was sittin' in the back o' the room? I seen him just before Smoke chased us out. A little bit of a runt, he was; but I'd shore admire to shake his hand."

Jake struggled to his feet. "I don't know where he is. Hightailed it, I reckon." He turned to Givens apologetically. "You see, Tom, I kinda lied to you. Smoke had been raisin' so much sand that I thought mebbe I could throw a scare into him that'd make him behave

for a while. So I told him the sheriff was goin' to send a man over to clean up, just like I told you; and the first name that popped into my head was Hell-On-Wheels McGorgan."

"My gosh!" said Tom in a strained voice. "You mean to tell me that you *guessed* the little fella's name?"

"Why, no, Tom," replied Jake, "I didn't. Don't even know his name. Seen him onct or twice at the county seat. He's been prospectin' out in the Panamints and was likely on his way home. He's just sort of a cracked old feller. I reckon he knowed that neither o' these fellas were deputies, and aimed at makin' a play to save 'em."

"Jake, are you loco?" asked the puzzled Tom. "Why, I heard him yellin' clear through the closed door, 'I'm Hell-On-Wheels McGorgan!'"

"That wasn't him," explained Jake embarrassedly. "It was me. He unlocked the door and let me out so's I could help him, I reckon. But when I seen them two innocent fellas about to be strung up because o' the lie I'd told Smoke, I dang near passed out. I just couldn't let Quigley hang 'em, so I grabbed the gun outa the little fella's hand and shot out the light. Then the gun fannin' started and I reckon I went crazy. All I remember is runnin' down the room yellin' 'I'm Hell-On-Wheels McGorgan!' and pullin' the trigger at every jump. Then a chunk o' lead creased me, and I fell over a chair."

There was a period of heavy silence.

"And so," said Tom Givens at last, "there ain't no Hell-On-Wheels McGorgan?"

"Nope," answered Jake, "there ain't."

"By Godfrey!" said Tom, and there was a note almost of reverence in the way he said it. "Hy, Fred, cut them hombres down and git behind the bar. Set out the best likker in the place and plenty of it! We're drinkin' on Smoke and Curley this time, and we're drinkin' to the real hell-on-wheels—Deputy Sheriff Jake Nails!"

POLE CAWHORN

the MAN from Windigo Butte

IN

"The Devil's Causeway"

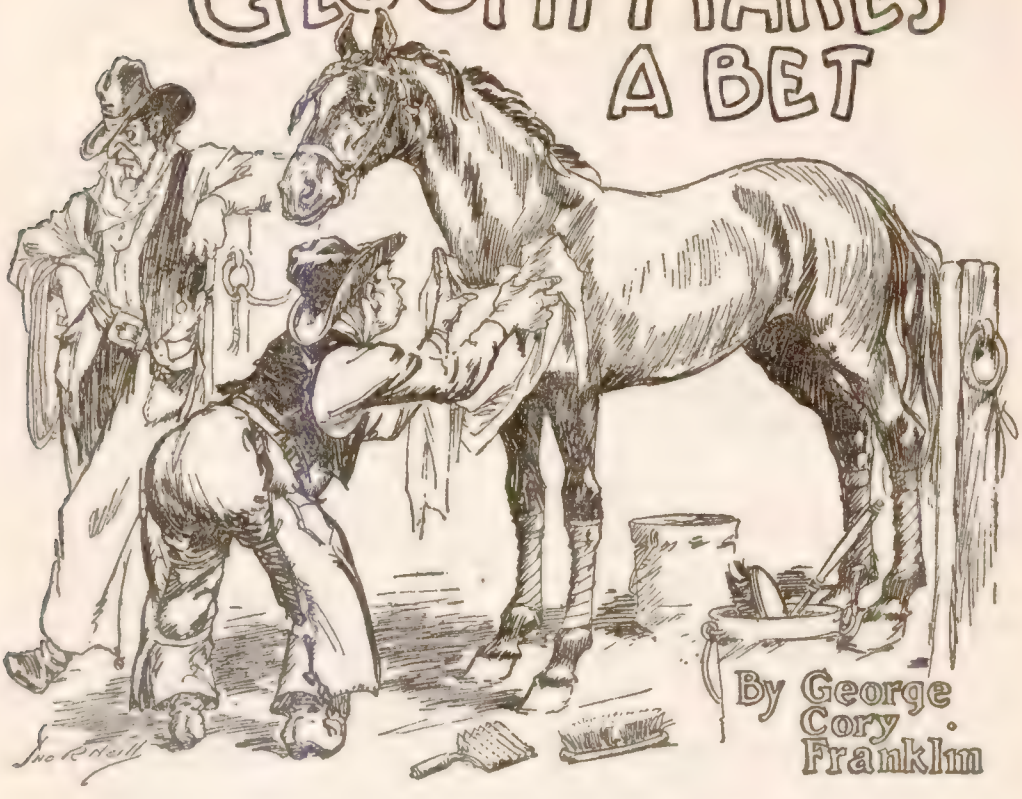
a novelette by

NORRELL GREGORY

THE NEXT

out August 20th *WEST*

GLOOMY MAKES A BET



Author of "Tell It To Sweeney," "The Bullet Screen," etc.

Gloomy knows well enough that the cow business and race horses don't mix a-tall!

THE great trouble with Stub as a partner is that he'll get just as spiflicated over some new idea that hits him as he would be if he had a quart of Old Rippey all to himself and nuthin to do but absorb it. He comes a bustin' into our line camp one afternoon like the Apaches was after him. He can hardly wait to put on a clean shirt and a pair of new overalls until he's out catchin' him a fresh horse and cinchin' his saddle.

"Hey," I incinerates in a gentle whisper like I was tryin' to turn the point of a stampede, "whatever has happened to you? Have you forgot that Gus Knight is payin' us twenty a month and prunes to help these Bar K cows keep theirselves from bein' pilfered by rustlers?"

"What's the matter, Gloomy," he argufies back at me, "ain't I doin' my part? I've made three trips to town for grub in the last week, and I'm goin' again tonight. I've rode clear to Burnt Timber hill today and shoved a bunch of strays onto the river range——"

"That's all right," I breaks in, "but why when you go to Honda for grub, don't you take a pack horse with you instead of tryin' to pack it in your chaps pockets? The last time you brought out beans enough for one pot and a piece of wormy pork. You're ridin' the tails off our extra horses doin' this grub-trammin', and ain't gettin' ahead none a-tall. I've shortened up the latigo on my pants until the front buttons is rubbin' my backbone, and I crave food, something that will tend to swell me out so that I'll look more like a feed lot shipper and less like a orphan calf."

"I'll tell you Gloom," he says, "I've got a chance to make our fortune if you'll just be patient a few days longer."

"Look a here, you bow-legged wart on the face of nature," I asservates, "don't you try to ring me in on any more schemes to rope wild animals and sell 'em to a zoo."

"No, I won't do that," he promises,

and lopes away leavin' me to do the chores and get supper all by myself.

I'd got done the evenin's work and left the dishes for Stub to wash when he comes in. I'd set down on a bench outside to wait for him when, all of a sudden a sickenin' thought hit me right where my solar plexus would have camped if I'd been a little fatter than a rake handle. "Gosh all fish hooks," I says right out loud, "I'll bet he's chasin' around after that dude race horse man again and, if he is, I'll kick his brains up into his empty head for him."

I saddled up and high tailed it for Honda, and sure enough I found Stub sittin' at a table in the back room of the Cowboy's Rest lookin' like a love sick squaw waitin' for her buck to come home. He don't give me a chance to lambast him, but starts in to explain. "Gloomy, the most joyous thing you ever did hear about has happened."

"Yeah," I snorts, "somebody must be goin' to adopt you, the way you looked when I come in."

"Wait till you hear what's happened to us," he says. "Mister Tabor, the race horse man, has done sold me Red Buck, the most beautifullest horse in his string, and me and you is goin' into the race horse business."

I'd had a creepy feelin' all the way in that somethin' awful was about to happen, and here it was in its most devastatin' and deludin' form. "Do you mean to tell me that you've let that slick horse trader skin you out of our bank roll for that smooth-skinned turtle that let a little Bar Cross cow pony beat him at the Rodeo?"

"But Gloomy," protesticates Stub, "Mister Tabor explained to me all about how that happened. The reason that Red Buck wouldn't run was because race horses get bred up till they're sensitive like artists a id actorines and—and folks. He says that Red Buck is as temperamental as a movie star. He wouldn't run against a common horse. Now, if we can match him against a real race horse, it'll be different."

I WAS so mad I had a notion to throw a gun right there and end forever Stub's efforts to get rich quick. Before I could decide whether to kill him outright and put him out of his misery, or to just maim him for life, he springs something else.

"Gloomy, what's a sycophant?" he asks.

"How should I know?" I growls. "I don't know nuthin' about them foreign animals. Why?"

"Well, that's what that lawyer feller called me when he was makin' out the paper that gives us Red Buck. He said I'd made a sycophant out of myself to Mister Tabor, till he felt he must reward me by sellin' us the horse for almost nuthin'."

"But you haven't—have you, Stub?" I asks. "You ain't done nuthin' like that."

"How the hell do I know what I've done," he snorts, "undess you tell me what he meant?"

"Come on," I says, "I didn't know it was so bad as that. I'll buy you a drink."

The barkeep is one of these edicationary sharks, so I asks him what a sycophant is. He said he didn't know, but he could find out, and pretty soon he comes back and says "It's a parasite, somethin' that lives off from another organism."

"There you are," I tells Stub, "that lawyer was callin' you what folks now-a-days has named them cooties. Just another name for a grayback or a flea."

Stub yanked his gun and twisted the cylinder to see that it was full. His face was white and his blue eyes was turnin' green like a proddy steer's. I knew I'd got to get him out of town right off where I could calm him down, or there'd be a killin', so in the crises I turned his attention to the race horse. "Come on," I says, "if you've bought that runnin' horse, we'll have to lead him home slow so's not to get him hurt travelin' on rough ground."

Stub swallowed his Adam's apple like a cow that's tired of chewin' her cud, and gets plumb interested again in this horse, and all the way home he's figurin' on how he's goin' to rib up a race and win us enough so that we can buy some more. "When we get us a string of three race horses, Gloomy," he chortles, "we'll go on the grand circus."

"Don't you mean grand circuit?" I asks, not bein' sure myself.

"Well, somethin' like that," he thinks. "Anyway, I heard Mister Tabor and that danged lawyer that called me a louse, talkin' about it."

FOR the next two or three months them Bar K cows has to take care of theirselves a lot, cause Stub is a total loss, and by the time I do the cookin' and rustle grub from town, I don't have time to do much ridin', which engenderfies a spirit of independence in them critters that makes 'em as scary as a widow woman at a dance. Of course I'm plumb deloobrious about this race that Stub has got fixed up with Benny Means against Benny's little mare, Antelope. It ain't for very big stakes cause Stub has paid the money we'd been savin' for the last six years for Red Buck, but it's sure all we got, and then some, cause Stub has got Gus Knight to advance us three months' wages, so if we lose, which I know we're goin' to, we'll have to work all fall and part of the winter for nuthin'. We're goin' to be broker than that poor little Hagar girl was when Missus Abraham caught her goin' to the movies with Abe that time, and made him set her afoot out in the sand hills with nuthin' but a Arizona water sack and the extra kid.

Stub sure puts in a lot a time makin' over Red Buck. When he ain't rubbin' and exercisin' him he's pettin' him and teachin' him tricks till that pony is as nutty about Stub as Stub is over the horse and, hearin' Stub talk about him all the time I got stuck on him too. If only I could have made myself believe that the horse would run half as good as he looked as though he oughta, I'd a had as much enthusigus as Stub had, but all these schemes that Stub has ribbed up to make us rich has made me as causantimonious as a coon at a new knot hole.

A few years before an old grizzly of an uncle of mine had got so full of inspiration juice that he'd thought he was a gambler, and had committed suicide by stealin' a ace in a poker game with Short-card Charlie. I'd never told Stub that I'd cashed in a thousand dollars as a result of them there berevements I'm sufferin', but I'd put the money in old man Cupples Bank and let her ride, with the idea that this compound interest thing that the Banker told me about would breed us enough little thousands so that some day we'd get a bunch of cows and, by bein' handy with a rope and plumb watchful of our interests, we'd build us up a real herd same as other cowmen had been doin'.

Aug. 20-30

I'm pretty foxy with all this play. I had to be in order to keep a whole shirt on my back, with Stub always out to win us a stake with some fool scheme or other, so one day when Stub has had to go to the Bar K in order to quiet Gus Knight's suspicions that we ain't ridin' I sprang a scheme I've worked out to make sure whether or not this Red Buck will run against Antelope or not. I give Benny Means' rider a pretty buckskin shirt a squaw had made for me, and we takes Antelope and Red Buck out on a straight piece of road and tries 'em out.

I rode Red Buck myself so's to be sure that there wouldn't be any mistakes, and if the reason this pet of ours won't run is because he's got a superior complexion, he's sure a peach at disguisin' his feelin's, cause he won't try any more against this pretty Antelope mare than he did against a cow pony. Antelope can just run rings around him, and there ain't any doubt at all but that we're sunk unless I can do something to recuperationize our impendin' losses, which Stub's foolishness has got us into.

Next day I went to Honda and drew out all my money and put it with the barkeep of the Cowboys Rest to see if he could find anybody that'd be fool enough to bet on Red Buck. I even told the man that if he couldn't get my money on Antelope to offer whatever odds he had to give in order to get a bet. I knew I was playin' a cinch by bettin' my roll on Antelope after havin' tried our horse out, but then two defenseless orphaned cowboys has to live, and I soothed my consciousness over playin' a sure thing like this by thinkin' that any of these horse gamblers would have done the same to me if they had been cute enough and had been in the least little bit suspicious that Red Buck might run.

ABOUT a week later I rode into Honda to see how my barkeep was gettin' along placin' my thousand dollars, and I'm plumb happy when he tells me he got it down on Antelope to win at odds of four to one against me—at least we're goin' to save two hundred and fifty dollars.

That night when I got back to camp Stub is just comin' in from exercisin' Red Buck, and he's got a grin all over his face. "It's sure a shame we ain't got more money to bet on this little pony,

Gloomy," he gloriates. "He'd just run off and leave that Antelope if I'd let him, but you see, I know how to handle him so well that I can make him run just exactly the way I want him to, and my idea of this race is to just nose that pony out at the wire. If I was to let Red Buck step his best we'd never be able to get another race in this country."

"Let Stub dream," I thought. "We're safe anyhow, cause I'm sure to win two hundred and fifty if Antelope beats him, which I knows he will and, if a miracle should happen, and Red Buck should beat Antelope, our original bet which is down at five to one, would even us up, so any way it goes I'm feelin' safe, only such a calamity would make Stub plumb uncontrollable, cause he'd figure that our horse couldn't be beat and life would be a nightmare all the time."

THE day of the big race brought people from all over the valley and I felt a cold shiver shoot up my spine when I saw that the bettin' was pretty even, and when the two horses come out on the half mile track at the Rodeo grounds, and I saw 'em together, if I hadn't tried 'em out I'd a said that Stub's judgment was good. Not that this Antelope ain't pretty. She's a race horse, all right, slender, well muscled legs, pretty, round barrel, sloping shoulders and hips, and well quartered, but Lordy, what a picture that Red Buck looks. He's built like one of these smooth haired dogs some dudes brought out here once to chase coyotes with, and every bit of the conditionin' Stub has give him shows. His coat looks like a piece of red rock I found one time that a old prospector told me was jasper. His mane and tail looked as soft as a woman's hair, and his black hoofs has been polished till they twinkle like the patent leather slippers at a biscuit shooter's ball.

I went over by Stub while he's strippin' himself for the race, and I got another shock when I see the way Red Buck looks at him. That pony's eyes has a different expression. They shine when he looks at Stub, and anybody that knows a horse could have seen that Red Buck is stuck on that cowboy.

There's two men comin' across the ground, and I'm surprised when I saw it was Taylor, the race horse man, and the lawyer that had called Stub names.

"Your horse sure looks fine, Stub," says Taylor.

"If he'd only run like he looks," says the lawyer.

Stub ain't got anything on but his underclothes. His best suit, chaps, silver mounted spurs and saddle are layin' where he'd taken 'em off. His face was white under the tan when he turned on that lawyer. "I've got everything I've got bet on this horse," he says. "Even Red Buck is mortgaged, but my clothes and outfit ought to be worth a hundred dollars. My bridle alone cost twenty-five. I'll bet the works that I win this race."

"Done," says the lawyer. "I'll put up a hundred dollars against your clothes and outfit."

Taylor looks sort of wishfull, like he'd oughta spoke before the lawyer did, and somehow right off I thought about how Stub and me has been partners for so many years. Something riz up inside of me at the idea of this cowboy lovin' a horse so much that he'd bet his clothes on him. I've still got the two hundred dollars interest money that I'd kept back in case a miracle should happen, and I'm danged if I didn't bet with Taylor on Red Buck to win, in spite of the fact that I've got a thousand bet on Antelope.

Stub's eyes fills up with tears when he takes me by the hand. "You're a partner worth havin', Gloomy," he says, "and you never made a better investment than that bet."

It's a mile race, twice around that half mile track, and the crowd is sure sold on the idea that it's goin' to be a horse race. They're almost standin' on their tip toes when Stub and the Mean's rider eases them two beauties out onto the track. There ain't any prancin' or buckin' or tuggin' at the reins by either horse. Seems like they know that this race is for blood and they ain't wastin' any time a-tall. They cantered up to the line like a couple a trained athletes, and the starter says "Go."

THEY left the grandstand with their noses even and both riders layin' low over the necks of the horses. Folks sort a breathed gently, they didn't talk. Among people whose lives are spent with 'em, horses get to be like humans, and these men forget the money they had bet and, win or lose, they was wantin' to see the best horse win. Everybody knew it would be a clean horse race

and no foolin' or tricks—just straight runnin'.

On the first lap Antelope was a full length ahead, and as they passed the grandstand I could see that Stub's face looked drawn up, sort a withered like a cliff dweller's mummy. Both horses was runnin' easy but I saw the Means rider's spurs touch against Antelope's sides as they flashed by, and the mare added another length to her lead in the next quarter. I looked away from the track when I saw what was goin' to happen. That thousand dollars I'd bet on Antelope didn't look any bigger than a postage stamp when I thought how Stub's heart was in this race. I never wanted to win so bad in my life as I wanted to lose now.

They rounded the last curve into the home stretch with the mare nearly three lengths ahead, and we could see plenty of daylight between her and Red Buck. I pulled out my old red handkerchief to wipe mist from my eyes, and I heard a murmur like the June breeze whisperin' through a forest of aspen leaves. The crowd is so excited that they just surge forward without knowin' it, and then I looked again, that space has narrowed to a length and the Means rider is flashin' his rawhide whip back and forth over Antelope's shoulders.

I could see that she still had speed left that Stub hadn't figured on. Nobody had. That little mare was sure some runnin' hoss, and she was comin' down that home stretch with her nostrils wide open and her legs flashin' like those of a scared deer.

"Stub's waited too long," I thought, "cause even if Red Buck was as good as the boy thinks he is he couldn't pass her now."

I found myself grippin' the rail to keep from sailin' over the prairie. "If only Red Buck could gain one more length." I was right out there with Stub, breathin' into those flashin' red ears of that horse, tryin' to put my own soul into the scant hundred yards between 'em and the wire. I heard a voice beside me sob "Come on, Red Buck!" and I knew that even the lawyer had forgot that he'd bet against the horse, and was ridin' with Stub, same as I was.

Fifty yards, and I could see Buck's nose close to the pole. Twenty-five, and his head showed beyond the mare. By the holy prophets, his ears was pointin' forward! That pony was runnin' easy, and he was actually lookin' like he thought he was winnin' the race. Then for the first time that I'd ever seen Stub use a whip, a little thin piece of whalebone not much larger than a willow twig began to flash back and forth over Red Buck's withers, and those two or three cuts must have stung like a yellow jacket, cause that horse hadn't showed us what he had until now. His quarters swelled with the strain of the biggest jumps I'd ever seen made, his long, silky mane stood straight back along his outstretched neck, and right under the wire he stuck his old red nose out in front of Antelope.

Crazy! I tell the whole bald-faced world we went crazy. Who cared about money now? I saw the lawyer that had called Stub names standin' with one arm about the cowboy and one around Red Buck's neck, and the two was grinnin' into each other's faces. Then I heard the lawyer say; "Never mind the money I loaned you, Stub, with which to buy Red Buck. We fooled 'em all, even good old Gloomy, and you've won his thousand dollars, which will teach him better than to bet against you again."

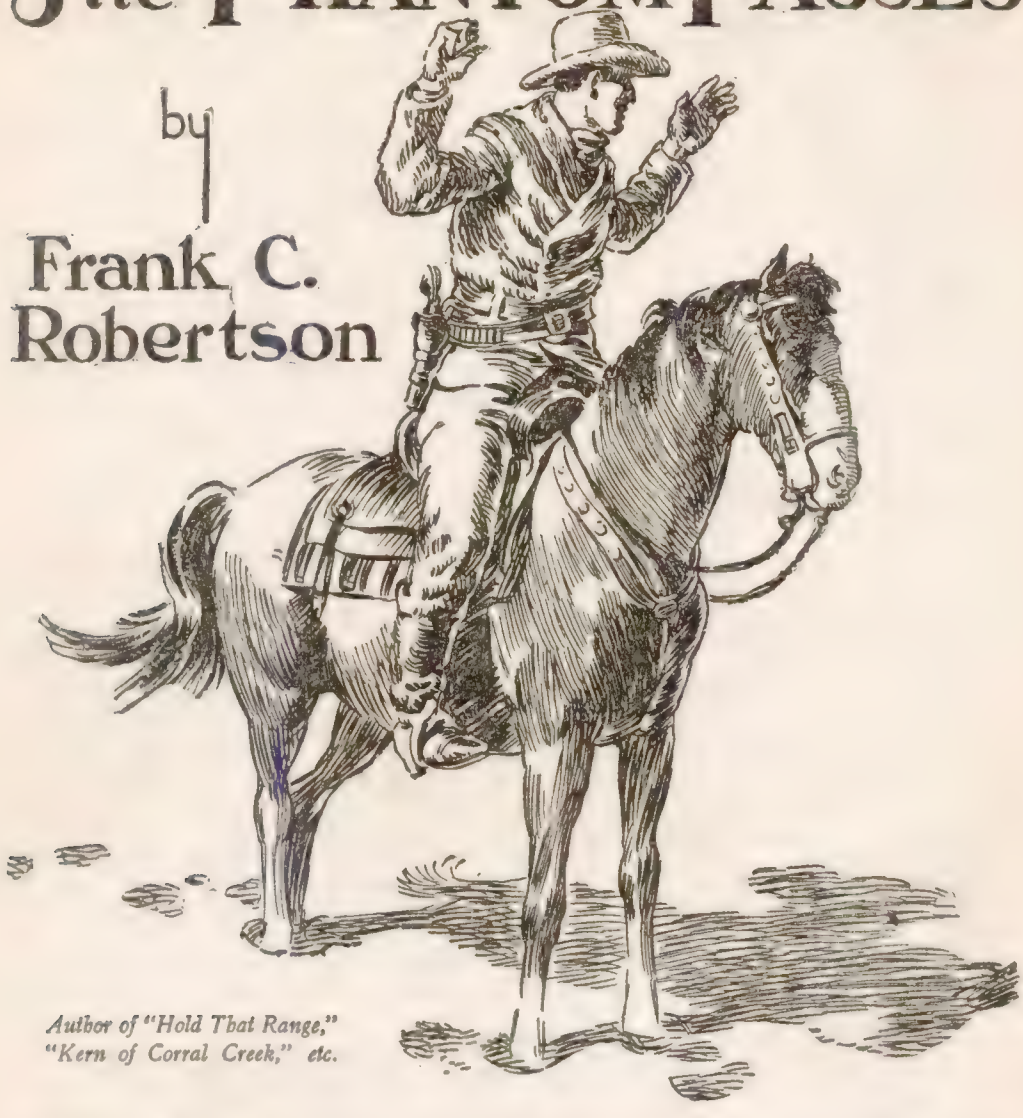
Yep, we've won all the way down the line, and now that we've got a few cows and a pretty little ranch, the lawyer comes out once in a while to fish in the trout stream that runs down through our meadow, and him and Stub is sure jollificatious about that horse race they ribbed up.

"Slim Texas" by CLEM YORE
a long novel
COMING SOON
ACTION—SPEED—THRILLS

The PHANTOM PASSES

by

Frank C. Robertson



Author of "Hold That Range," "Kern of Corral Creek," etc.

He went into winter camp a scared slinky kid, and came out a four-square cowpunching man.

SCALDING tears of self pity and fatigue rained unchecked down the sallow cheeks of Ollie Margetts, alias "the Phantom." Was that damned light after all an illusion? He had judged it to be a mile away at most when he left the railroad and started to it, but he had been walking and falling for hours since then, and it still seemed the same distance away.

Eighteen hours before, the callous boot of a brakeman had lifted the Phantom bodily off a coal gondola, and deposited him on the frozen soil of a Nevada desert. As he plodded on down the track three separate trains had passed him by with derisive hoots from the locomotive. They had been going too fast for him to take a chance. He hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours before he had been kicked off and when the darkness of an early winter night folded itself around him no food was in sight.

Shortly after that he had seen the light.

"Gosh, what a country!" mumbled the Phantom. "W'y didn't I take my rap instead o' runnin' into this?" But the Phantom knew that if it was to be done over again he would run just the same.

The "rap" might have led to the electric chair.

Suddenly the light disappeared, winked out. Strangely enough it was heartening to the Phantom. Somewhere in this bleak land of strong smelling sage and flat, salty marshes were human hands that had erased that light. He plodded on.

The Phantom's senses were acute. The tang of the sage was in his nostrils like strong perfume, but now another odor assailed him and caused his nose to crinkle with disgust. It was an oily, fetid smell, stronger than the sage, yet somehow breathing of life. The nauseous odor came from one spot, and he directed his faltering footsteps in that direction.

Presently low, moaning sounds struck his ears. Being city bred he was completely at a loss to account for the strange sounds until a mass of white bodies arose in his path and scampered away from him. The shock of fear driven through him departed as he realized that the animals were sheep.

The fear came back like a knife stab as a dog came raging toward him. Dark as it was he could see the gleaming teeth of the huge sheep dog.

"Git out! Git out!" he yelled wildly. He looked around for a weapon, but seeing none his hand slipped around under his left shoulder and cuddled the butt of the gat he always carried there.

"Go back, or I'll kill yuh," he gritted savagely. He would have done it, too, except that he realized that such action might later endanger his chance to obtain food. But his sheer animal ferocity cowed the dog. It continued to growl and snarl as it circled him, but it kept well out of reach.

"Call yer dog or I'll kill him," he

yelled. The light that he had followed so long had again flared out, and this time close at hand. The dimness which puzzled him was explained by the fact that he now saw it through the canvas walls of a sheep camp. Previously he had seen it shining through the little oblong window in the back.

"Who are you?" challenged a voice from where the camp wagon stood. It was a gruff voice, and charged with deep suspicion. Had he been under less strain the Phantom would have detected it.

"I'm lost," wailed the Phantom. "Call yer dog off."

"You alone?" the sheepherder demanded.

"Hell yes—I never was so much alone in my life," the Phantom sobbed.

"Come on then," the voice commanded. "The dog won't bite." But the Phantom didn't move until the man called his dog back to the camp. Then he concealed his gun back under his shirt and approached the wagon.

A BIG, partly-dressed man of about thirty, with a fringe of short reddish whiskers surrounding his face like a mop, stood in the camp door. His hard, blue eyes were anything but friendly. For a minute he stared down at the rather fragile form of the Phantom, and a twisted smile broke the monotony of his beard. "Come in," he rumbled.

The Phantom stepped up on the double-tree, and thence to the door of the camp. As he stepped inside his foot slipped. He would have fallen only for a lucky grab at a wagon bow. He looked down and fairly jumped from the spot. On the floor of the camp was a great smear of blood which somebody had recently been trying to mop up. The sight affected the Phantom strangely. He saw the bearded man glaring at him furiously.

"What—caused that?" he asked in a hollow voice.

Suddenly the big man opened his mouth and a loud, mirthless guffaw issued forth.

"What caused that?" he bellowed. "I'll tell yuh. It was a remark in the wrong place."

The Phantom sank down upon the projection seat with a sigh of pure bodily relief. His mind, however, worked at fever pitch. He had lived dangerously all his life, and was familiar with dangerous people. But here was a new type, and he sensed that the man was dangerous as so much dynamite.

"Town guy, huh?" the sheepherder grunted presently. "Where you going?"

"Nowheres," the Phantom sighed. "Got kicked off the train early this mornin'. Walked ever since. Saw your light. Thought it was closer."

The big man grinned. "I know. It's the thin air up here. It's just about fifteen miles to the railroad, but you probably thought it was half a mile."

"Gosh, I'd hate to go over it again," the Phantom sighed.

"You won't," the big man said positively.

"What yer mean?" the Phanton demanded.

"I mean I need a campmover for the winter—an' you're elected."

"Haven't you had one?" the Phantom inquired, though he had no idea what a campmover was.

"I did." The herder sized the Phantom up again most openly. He saw a tall, thin body crowned by a long, rather handsome head with a face still pale despite two weeks of unpleasant exposure. But it was the narrowed eyes, the artificially twisted lips, and the long bony fingers, white as paper save for their yellow stained tips which gave him his clue. "I reckon I know your type," he said finally. "You're a rat. A gutter rat. You'd do anything for money. Probably you're making your getaway now. Am I right?"

The Phantom's eyes were pin pricks of dangerous light, but he said nothing.

"I killed a man a few hours ago," the herder went on impressively. "He was too fresh. I stood his lip for weeks. Tonight we had words, and he started into the camp to throw me out. That's where I stopped him." He pointed at the smear of blood. Still the Phantom said nothing.

"In a way your arrival here was lucky," the herder went on. "I'd have had to leave these sheep in a few weeks, but now it won't be necessary. With your help we'll drive the herd away down into the Pongo Valley country, and I'll sell them if they don't winter kill. They'll bring around twenty thousand dollars, and if you cause me no trouble I'll split with you. If you do I'll wring your neck."

The Phantom nodded. "What I'd like now is something to eat," he sighed.

THE herder kindled a fire, and prepared the best meal the Phantom had eaten for days. Yet it was hard for Ollie Margetts to keep his eyes away from that horrid, slimy patch of blood. He was sure that the sheepherder was a maniac, but with a maniac's peculiar shrewdness. At any rate the man meant to keep the Phantom there and make use of him. And the Phantom, thinking of the gat under his arm, didn't intend to stay. He might get away without having to kill the man, but if it became necessary he wouldn't shrink. He had no use for this desert. He meant to get back to the railroad.

During the course of the meal the herder told him that his name was Jolly, and neither of them noticed how incongruous the name was. The fellow talked avidly of the recent killing. It seemed that his hatred for the deceased campjack had been bottled up for weeks, and had boiled over that evening when the man, no doubt irritated by the herder's surly manner, had threatened to give him a thrashing.

The Phantom was convinced that Jolly was quite insane, and yet the man seemed to have education and good sense. As the weary hobo looked around the camp he saw books disposed in every possible nook—Shakespeare, Hugo, Goethe, Nietzsche, Emerson, Whitman. He made a casual reference to them and Jolly began to discourse upon literature.

"There hasn't been a literary giant in America since Whitman," the man shouted. "Look at these magazines here. Trash! That's what my campmover wanted to read. Bah!" The man picked up half a dozen tawdry magazines with torn covers and flung them out into the night. He glared at the pictures of stage women adorning the ribs of the camp body, but refrained from tearing them down, though their being there was the deceased campmover's work.

"Do you read Shakespeare?" Jolly thundered.

"No, I never read nothin' heavier than a picture post card," the Phantom said.

"Just a plain fool like the rest of a race of fools," Jolly snarled. "Get into bed. Sleep. Get up and eat, and then sleep some more. It's all you're fit for."

THE Phantom was glad enough to crawl into the comfortable looking bed. Had he been less weary he would have had some qualms about sleeping by the side of this red-handed murderer. The Phantom had seen the bodies of men who had been "taken for a ride" but none of them had affected him so queerly as this splotch upon the sheep camp floor. He had never seen a man who made him feel quite so much afraid as this brawny, red-bearded shepherd. Nevertheless he slept.

When he awoke the next morning dawn had scarcely arrived, but he could see that the air was full of fluffy, feathery snowflakes. The sight filled him with a peculiar dread, but it had put Jolly almost in a jovial mood.

"I buried him out there," the herder indicated vaguely. "They'll never find the grave. Come on fill that belly of yours. We've got to get moving."

"Where?" the Phanton asked.

"I'll take care of that."

The Phantom noted the heavy Colt revolver which swung at the herder's hip, but he didn't question his own ability to draw his gat and kill the man whenever it became necessary. The sole question was should he resort to that, or merely slip away when the man wasn't looking.

If he reported the murder he knew that he would be held as a material witness, and that might lead to complications. Moreover, he was stiffer than he remembered to ever have been. He needed a rest. Why not take it here?

As soon as breakfast was over and the dishes washed Jolly packed everything away tightly. "Come on," he said. "The herd is moving. We'll move the camp later."

"Then I'll stay here," the Phantom said.

"So you'll stay here," Jolly sneered. "Oh, no, son, you'll go with me. I need help." Those pale, staring blue eyes sent the goose flesh crawling up the Phantom's spine. He told himself that he could use his gat before the fellow could move, but somehow he couldn't do it. He would wait. He got up and followed the man outside.

The sheep herd was already in motion, and the Phantom trudged along

dutifully. The snow skirled about so thickly that he never could see all the sheep at one time, but the herder and the dog kept them constantly moving. Sometimes they crossed over ridges or drifted down ravines or gullies, but most of the time it seemed they were going around hillsides. The inclination of the sheep was to follow the level.

The hours passed and the Phantom began to grow hungry. The snow continued, but it was fine and powdery and made no solid substance on the ground. Finally a few streaks of sky began to appear, and in half an hour it had cleared away.

A land of desolation lay spread before the Phantom's eyes. Everywhere he looked he saw high, rough knolls or hills covered with juniper, or uneven flats carpeted by sage or shadscale. It was some time before he knew that the moist salty tang in his nostrils came from the latter peculiar bush. As far as he could see it was the same. There was no sign of any human habitation, not even a sheep wagon. He looked eagerly for the railroad, but saw nothing resembling it. Nor had he the least idea in which direction it lay. It was a terrible place for a city man to find himself. The worst of all possible fears, the fear of being lost, swept over him.

He found Jolly looking at him queerly. "Hungry?" the herder asked. The Phantom nodded.

"All right. You stay here with the sheep while I go back after the camp. You'd never find it or the horses. Doubt if you could hitch up a team if you did. I'll have the camp here before sundown."

The man strode away, and as soon as he was out of sight the Phantom climbed to the top of the highest knoll. He was hungry, but if he could see any sign of life elsewhere he wouldn't return to the sheep.

When he got to the top of the knoll he could see nothing except similar ones surrounding him that were just as high. He went on to another and another. Suddenly he realized that he was in danger of getting lost even from the herd. In something of a panic he hurried back. The sheep had moved, but he heaved a sigh of relief when he heard the tinkle of the bells.

Jolly said nothing when he came along with the camp, but the Phantom had an idea the man knew just what he had done. That night Jolly told him harrowing tales of men who had become lost on the desert and finally fallen victims to the coyotes and buzzards.

"And if I were you," he finished up, "I wouldn't have any fool ideas about trying to get back to the railroad. Tomorrow I want you to start learning to do things."

FOR a week they moved about ten miles each day, through a country that was unchanging in its gray-green monotony. And not one sign of human life did they encounter. Each day the Phantom had planned to leave, and each day he had postponed his departure with the hope that the morrow would bring more favorable circumstances. At the end of that time he realized that he was as hopelessly lost in this vast desert as a child who had never seen a city would be if suddenly set down in the night time in the streets of his own native Kansas City.

The Phantom was learning to do things. Jolly was in a hurry to get somewhere, and the Phantom was invaluable because he could stay with the herd while the herder got the horses and moved the camp. At first he had wondered how two thousand animals could be kept in one band and moved from place to place. He wondered why they didn't starve to death. Soon he learned that it was sheep nature to stay in a band. He learned how to let them spread out and feed, and how to keep them moving on trail. He learned to watch the arroyos for signs of the gray marauders of the desert who were always lurking around to make a kill.

Once or twice he inadvertently cut off a bunch and went on without them. Jolly happened to notice their absence in time to recover them, and he cursed the Phantom, who had never before stood for a cursing silently.

When alone the Phantom gripped the handle of his gat, and vowed vengeance. It occurred to him to kill the man, and take the camp wagon until he reached a railroad. But he didn't know how to harness the team, nor how to drive them if he did.

Even if he learned to perform this task the plan would have its drawbacks, for the first time anybody saw him with the sheep camp they would ask questions which he couldn't answer. He might

even be accused of killing both the herder and the man Jolly had murdered. So that scheme wouldn't do, and he dared not chance it without supplies.

One other thought had also entered his mind, though he had rejected it swiftly. If he killed Jolly and took the camp, what would become of the sheep? He knew well enough what would happen. Coyotes would split them into many bunches, and what the wolves didn't kill would eventually become snowbound somewhere and starve to death. It would be a big loss for somebody, but no matter. It wasn't his funeral. He had to get back to the railroad.

They had gradually been getting higher and higher, until many times it required much effort to get the sheep across the deep drifts of snow they were frequently encountering. Jolly was worried. But at last they reached what Jolly called the summit. It looked no different to the Phantom from other places they had traversed, except that ahead of them lay a deep, narrow valley.

"See that valley?" Jolly demanded. "Finest winter range for sheep ever laid outdoors. But nobody ever comes here because the snow gets ten feet deep where we are now. You wouldn't think it, but the altitude here is nearly nine thousand feet."

"You mean—we're to winter—down there?"

"Just that. Tomorrow I'm going to leave you with the herd while I go out after supplies. It'll take me a week, but you'll be all right. When I get back we'll be all set till spring. Then, when the snow goes off, we'll drive to a shearing corral south of here an' get sheared. Nobody who doesn't know the sheep will be able to tell the brand by spring, because it grows all out of shape as the wool gets long. We'll daub on a new brand, and sell the herd," Jolly explained.

The Phantom nodded. Winter in such a place! It was unthinkable. He would wait until Jolly got ready to start and then he would suddenly get the drop on the man and compel him to take him to the railroad.

THAT afternoon as the Phantom was gloomily looking over the feeding herd a sudden commotion close at hand brought him up with a jerk. Out of a blind draw less than a hundred feet away from him had shot two slim-bodied, long muzzled coyotes. The sheep there had gone into a tight bunch which hampered their movements. He saw the flash of gleaming teeth, saw two ewes go end over end and lie still with their jugulars severed, and saw the slim, gray bodies dart into the bunch like sinister ghosts, and saw other ewes fall in the same way.

The Phantom reached for his automatic and gave a yell. The coyotes, crazed with the blood lust, continued the slaughter. The Phantom ran forward and emptied his gun at them.

At the first shot the animals turned to run, but the panic-stricken sheep were in their way. They twisted and doubled in a frenzy of fright until the Phantom's gun was empty. He slid in another clip just as the marauders got clear of the herd and were away like twin streaks. The Phantom fired again, and by sheer good luck he managed to hit one of them.

The coyote rolled over twice, got to its feet and ran on on three legs. It was badly hurt, and it could make only just a trifle better speed than the Phantom. The other brute quickly disappeared, but the Phantom pressed on in pursuit of the one he had hit. Now he was as wild to kill as the coyote had been. When one clip of cartridges was exhausted he would slip in another. He had wounded the coyote again, and now he was gaining.

Then, suddenly, he discovered that he had fired his last cartridge. A feeling of ghastly emptiness came over him as he realized what he had done. He stopped, and a few minutes later the wounded coyote disappeared in a patch of chaparral.

His gat, which he had kept so closely hidden against the time when he would need it to deal with Jolly, was useless. What was he going to do now; accept the virtual slavery which was now his portion, or try the dangerous experiment of trying to get Jolly's gun when the man was asleep?

The next morning the Phantom remarked carelessly, "I seen some coyotes yesterday, better let me take that gun."

Jolly was getting ready to take the three horses to town on the trip he had mentioned. "Sorry, but I reckon I'll be needing that," he said with grim sarcasm.

The Phantom's brain was filled with a murderous hatred, but he was helpless. He watched the herder's preparations with smouldering eyes, wondering why the man harnessed up the team when there was no wagon except the camp wagon. If he took that there would be no place for the Phantom to sleep and eat. That part was quickly solved.

Jolly chopped down two sturdy junipers and measured them to the right length to support the front end of the camp. Then bidding the Phantom prop the camp up when he lifted it the man set a powerful shoulder under the projecting corner and heaved upward. To the amazement of the Phantom the ponderous camp with its heavy load came out of the front bolster. After it was braced the man uncoupled the front wheels from the back and ran them out. Then he let the camp back down to a level position and braced it firmly. The front wheels were to serve as a cart on the trip to town.

BUT that exhibition of tremendous strength had had a peculiar effect upon the Phantom. Jolly, he knew, could break him in pieces with his naked hands like so much dry putty. Yet as the man was about to leave, the Phantom felt an overpowering sense of panic. If he let Jolly get away without him now, he was doomed to imprisonment in this desolate valley for the remainder of the winter. He knew that he couldn't stand Jolly that long. He would go mad and kill the fellow, or more likely get killed himself.

Jolly had built a sort of platform on the front running gears, and his bedding, and a little food and cooking utensils had been stowed upon it. He had just got one knee upon it preparatory to climbing on when the Phantom spoke.

"Stick up your hands!"

The herder looked around with a start, and a gust of anger flushed his face. His hand moved toward the big Colt's revolver swinging at his hip, but he thought better of it. How was he to know that there was nothing behind the menacing black muzzle of the automatic? But he didn't elevate his hands.

"Well, what do you want?" he sneered.

"I'm goin' out with you."

"You think so? Turn me in for murder and get a reward I suppose?"

"I don't care what happens to you, just so I get back to the railroad," the Phantom maintained.

"What about the sheep? Have you thought what would happen to them if we both leave?"

"To hell with the sheep. I wanta git away from here."

There was murder in the herder's eyes. Just so he must have felt before he killed his other campmover. The only thing that stopped him was an empty automatic. The Phantom was amazed at his own courage in running such a bluff, but he strove to create the impression that he knew himself master of the situation.

For a moment it seemed certain that Jolly was going to do something—go for his gun, or spring forward to crush and maim with his bare hands.

"Don't do it," the Phantom bluffed. "One move an 'I'll empty this gun into yore murderous carcass. Yo're a killer, but I've run with a tough gang myself."

"Sure. I knew you were a gangster the moment I laid eyes on you," Jolly declared. "We've got to talk this out. We can't leave these sheep alone. If you won't stay, I'll have to." The man turned and walked away.

The Phantom trembled. Had his gun been loaded he believed that he would have killed the herder then and there. He had never felt so helpless. There was the cart. He had only to climb upon it and drive away. Surely he could find some sort of habitation before the food was exhausted. But he dared not chance it, dared not tackle this Godforsaken desert alone. He was always getting turned around, and he couldn't take care of the horses. He could have wept in his futile rage.

He thought about making the man give up his gun and trying to kill him with that, but it would be too dangerous to come within reach of Jolly's hands. Even if he did he would still be helpless. The Phantom knew then that he couldn't kill Jolly—not yet. He wouldn't have supplies enough to last him all winter, and the thoughts of spending the winter there alone was terrifying. Even Jolly as a companion would be better than that. And with Jolly dead he couldn't hope to reach a town, unless somebody came along to show him the way. He looked at the sheep just beginning to graze away. For the first time he had a

feeling of compunction about abandoning them to their fate.

JOLLY had stopped twenty feet away. "Well, are you goin' or not?" he demanded.

"We'll go together, or neither one goes," the Phantom answered.

"You may get very tired of eating skin poor mutton before spring," Jolly shrugged.

The Phantom hesitated. After all they had to have supplies. He had no illusions about being able to endure more hardships than the burly herder. He either had to take his chances with the desert alone, or let the herder go. If he backed down now he couldn't hope to get the advantage of Jolly again, but it had to be done. He simply dared not risk his life alone in those cold, juniper clad hills.

Jolly suddenly turned and walked back to the cart. He climbed up on it and drove away without a backward glance. The Phantom followed the herd.

Two days later the Phantom saw a man ride up to the sheep camp and dismount. He almost broke into a trot as he felt that here was his chance for deliverance, but the nearer he got to the camp the more his steps lagged. Suppose this were the owner of the sheep?

The Phantom knew that the herd must be a long, long way from where it was supposed to be. Suppose the body of the murdered campmover had been discovered? How was he to explain his presence? Even if there was no immediate danger here he couldn't leave the sheep without explaining about Jolly, and again there was the acute danger that he would be held as a material witness. And back in Kansas City two other men had been killed.

The man at the camp looked gigantic in his knee length sheepskin overcoat. His tawny moustache was fringed with tiny icicles, and a pair of blue eyes seemed to look clear through the Phantom despite the fact that they were blood-shot from much riding in the wind. But it was not the man's face which interested the Phantom so much as it was the heavy star visible against his vest pocket as he threw open his coat.

"Hello, son," the big Westerner said in a tone that was neither friendly nor hostile. "Whose sheep are these?"

"Belong to a man named—named Smith," the Phantom answered. He knew that the owner's name was Hansen, but if there was any question he could blame Jolly for the mistake.

"Well, he's sure got a nerve tryin' to winter sheep here. About three chances to one yuh'll git snowbound before spring, an' in here yuh don't stand a chance in Gawd's world o' gittin' help."

"I don't know. I never was on the desert before."

"No? Where yuh from?"

"Los Angeles."

"Yeah? Where's yore herder?"

"Gone to town after supplies."

"What's his name?"

"I—don't know. I call him Bill."

"I see." The big officer was begining to frown. Things certainly looked queer here all right.

"By the way," the Phantom said glibly, "Bill didn't say when he'd be back. Sort of a sullen cuss you know. How far is it to the nearest town?"

"About seventy mile I'd say. He orta git back in three days—unless he gits drunk."

"Which direction is it—in a general way?"

"Northeast."

"You goin' that way now?"

"No. I stayed at a ranch about forty miles from here last night, an' I'm tryin' to make a sheep camp that far on the other side," Sheriff Jim Hoffman said matter-of-factly.

THE Phantom was filled with a strange admiration. This man could ride across the forbidding desert and take a chance on finding shelter at the end of a long, hard day as casually as the Phantom would cross a street. Men like these were not for him to go against out here.

"By the way, yuh didn't see a coupla fellers ridin' through the country here a few days ago?" the officer asked.

"I ain't seen nobody," the Phantom answered truthfully.

"Well, I didn't figger they would. I think they circled around to the east of here, so I figgered I might head 'em off by takin' this short cut. Horse thieves, but also wanted for murder. Don't monkey with 'em if yuh do see 'em because they're bad medicine. Soon kill a man as not."

Again that casualness of tone. The officer would warn another of danger,

but he wasn't a bit excited about hunting them single handed himself. Here was a type of man new to the Phantom. He wished that he could be like that. But much as he wanted to get away he dared not tell the truth to this grim-faced sheriff, nor on the other hand, did he care to risk deceiving him. It was an opportunity to escape that he had to pass up.

The sheriff ate an enormous meal, jokingly remarking that it might be his last for several days, and rode away. But just as he started he dropped a hint that he might be back later. The Phantom watched him wonderingly, and a strange sense of being alone came over him.

Seventy miles to town! Forty miles to the nearest ranch. The Phantom had always thought of distance in terms of city blocks. A mile must be a long way. Anyhow, it was far too long for him to venture it on foot. When Jolly got back he might steal a horse and try it.

IT WAS three days more before Jolly returned, with the cart piled high with supplies. The man was half frozen but there was a jubilant look in his eyes. A whimpering wind carried promise of an approaching storm.

"It'll snow tonight, an' we'll be safe enough from visitors till spring," the man said. "Nobody comes here anyway."

The Phantom felt no obligation to tell about the visit of the sheriff. Yet in the back of his mind he wondered constantly if the sheriff would try to return that way. If he did, what would happen? He felt instinctively that Jolly would never willingly allow the officer to get away and thus endanger the success of his own plans. The result, the Phantom knew, would have to have a marked effect upon his own destiny.

They were eating supper three days later when the barking of the dog announced the arrival of two strangers. Jolly sprang to his feet with his hand on his six-gun.

"I don't know who this is, but if yuh say a word, or make any trouble I'll get you. Sabbe?"

The Phantom nodded. His blood was coursing excitedly. Two men! The sheriff had said that the horse thieves he was hunting *might* come that way. Surely, nobody else would have any business there.

"Hello, shepherd. Peace be with you," called an ironic voice.

"Well?" challenged Jolly from the doorway.

"We saw your tracks comin' in here with supplies so we trailed along," the man answered. "Kinda low ourselves that way." The men got off their horses, but the watchful Phantom observed that whenever one of them was doing anything the other kept his eye upon Jolly.

"Where are you going?" Jolly demanded.

"We ain't decided yet. We may stay right here till we make up our minds," the man answered with subtle menace.

"Here you in the camp there—come out an' tend our horses," the other man called gruffly. "We're cold."

The Phantom put on his hat and coat and slouched out. These men were the horse thieves, and they were certainly tough characters. It seemed to be their intention to remain at the sheep camp as long as the supplies lasted. There was not enough to last four of them until spring, and it was not likely that either of these men or Jolly would hesitate long before bringing affairs to a crisis. The Phantom remained outside longer than necessary. He knew that Jolly was reluctantly cooking supper for the men. They were questioning him adroitly about the presence of the sheep there, and Jolly was making most unsatisfactory replies.

THE Phantom entered the camp when the men had finished eating.

"Clear off the table and wash those dishes," Jolly ordered him tersely.

The two strangers crawled back upon the bed and lighted cigarettes. "How do we sleep?" one of them queried.

"Don't you cary blankets?" Jolly rasped.

"Yeah, but we're not sleepin' outside under yore wagon, brother," the man retorted. "We'll take this side board out here, an' make the bed endways o' the wagon instead o' crossways. Then there'll be room for all four of us."

"This happens to be my camp," Jolly stated.

"Mebbe," the man said laconically. He turned to his companion. "Ivars, there's something damn queer about this layout here, have yuh noticed? This is no place

to winter a herd o' sheep. No sheepman would take such a risk with his own property."

"I reckon not, Wilk," the other said. "I reckon yuh figger there's a chance to winter the woollies here, an' if they do pull through you'll be ahead that much in the spring. Ain't that the idee?" Wilk demanded of Jolly.

The Phantom knew the tremendous fury that Jolly must feel, but the herder dared not start a fight now with these cold-eyed outlaws. Both were armed, and they kept their hands always close to their weapons. The Phantom they ignored.

"No," Jolly lied, "I was told to bring them in here."

"Whether or not, brother, you've got company for the winter," Wilk said. "I hope you've got plenty grub."

"Three might get by, but not four," Jolly said. The Phantom suddenly saw all eyes turned in his direction.

Would Jolly form an alliance with the men and get him out of the way, the Phantom wondered, or would he try to dispose of the two men?

"Let's roll in," the man Ivars suggested. "Come on, thin boy, fixin' the bed is yore job."

OBEDIENTLY the Phantom began to move the bed so that four men could occupy it with some measure of comfort. Ivars stood up to supervise the job, while Wilk stepped outside. Jolly remained seated on the projection. The Phantom worked slowly, keenly aware that the air was pregnant with danger.

"All right, Wilk," Ivars called. The outlaw outside stepped up on the doubletree, and Jolly turned to eye him.

Like a flash Ivars drew his gun and shoved the muzzle violently against the side of the seated Jolly. "One move, shep, an' it's curtains for you," he snarled.

Jolly half rose, and then subsided. The man might be crazy, but not enough so to deliberately throw away his life. "Another bad one," he said evenly. "This camp seems to be quite a gathering place."

"Git his gun, Wilk."

Jolly was relieved of his weapon; Wilk taking possession of everything and buckling the belt around his own waist.

"Just to make sure that we remain welcome here," Ivars apologized ironically. The Phantom hadn't moved. Apparently they didn't suspect that he carried a gun under the coarse flannel shirt.

That night the Phantom slept between Jolly and Wilk, though he did little sleeping. The situation, he knew, couldn't go on. None of the men would be willing to risk starvation. Nor could anybody go to town. Wilk and Ivars were wanted men, and didn't dare show themselves. They couldn't trust Jolly to go again, and the Phantom didn't know the way even if they would have been willing to trust him. If Jolly got the upper hand eventually the condition would be unchanged. He wouldn't dare go to town and leave the others in possession. Somebody was going to get killed, and "it wouldn't be long now." The Phantom thought longingly of the railroad.

It was snowing full blast in the morning. The sheep remained standing upon the bedground, unwilling to move. The men had breakfast and sat about glumly till ten o'clock. The Phantom wondered why the two outlaws who were in complete control of the situation didn't finish the job immediately. He was soon to learn the reason.

Jolly got up finally and stepped outside. "Those sheep'll have to eat," he said. "I'm going to drive them off the bedground."

The Phantom could hear the dog barking, and soon the herd had disappeared. The snow was loose and the tops of the sweet sage were well above it. The odor of wet salt from the shadscale hung heavily in the air. The sheep wouldn't suffer as yet.

Half an hour later Ivars circled the camp and reported that Jolly wasn't near.

"Well, Slats," he addressed the Phantom, "what do you know about the situation here?"

"Nothin'."

"How long you been with this bird, Jolly?"

"Two weeks."

"Who hired yuh?"

"Nobody."

"Hey, don't try to kid us. I suppose yuh figger to git a slice o' the profits if this herd o' sheep pulls through the winter?"

"No. I'm just a hobo. I come to this

camp one night when I was lost. I seen the light. Jolly had just murdered his campmover. He made me stay with him."

"Oh, ho!" Ivars ejaculated. "Our friend is a bad hombre then. I knew he was either crooked or crazy as soon as I saw these sheep in here."

"He's both," the Phantom assured them.

"Good thing we got his iron," Wilk commented.

"Listen, kiddo," Ivars went on. "We ain't angels ourselves. We aim to stay here this winter, an' if this herd of sheep lives, which may happen if it's a light winter, it'll be easy to sell 'em. If you stick with us an' herd the woolies this winter we'll split with yuh. But we've gotta git rid of this herder pronto. Yuh savvy?"

"I git yuh," the Phantom answered laconically. "I don't see where I got any voice in the matter."

"Yuh ain't. Only—yuh stick with the shep an' yuh get the same medicine he does. Ever kill a man?"

The Phantom was genuinely startled. "No!" he blurted.

"Don't let it worry yuh," Ivars grinned. "Yo're goin' to soon."

"I don't foller you."

"I told yuh this crazy herder would have to be killed off. If he killed his other campjack yuh oughta know he'd 'a' killed you before spring. We ain't killers ourselves, except mebbe in self-defense. Sooner or later we know this Jolly will make a break an' then we'll git him. But there's no use waitin' for that if you wanta go in with us."

"How do you mean?" the Phantom asked a little hoarsely.

"See that gun of his? You promise to git Jolly an' you can have it."

THE Phantom thought of his useless automatic. Without a weapon he felt utterly helpless, but if he could get his hands on this gun he would at least have an even chance with the others of survival. He had no love for Jolly, but to go out and deliberately stalk the man to murder him assuredly went against the grain.

"We're givin' you a chance," Ivars reminded. "If yuh don't take it we'll have to figger yuh trail with Jolly."

"All right, I'll do it—gimme the gun," the Phantom said huskily.

"Give it to him, Wilk," Ivars directed. "But don't make any mistake, kid. We'll be watchin' yuh close, an' the first bad-lookin' move yuh make—out goes yore glim."

The Phantom accepted the gun and slid out into the storm. His feelings were strangely mixed. For two weeks he had figured that he would have to kill the herder in order to insure his own escape. But now that he had the means at his command, had even been made to understand that his life depended upon it, he knew that he couldn't do it. He supposed it must be the voice of conscience, though he had never been troubled by such a thing before. With Jolly armed it would have been different, but he couldn't shoot down an unarmed man, for all that he had seen the thing done back in Kansas City.

The Phantom blundered along through the storm, but took a course so that he crossed his own tracks half an hour after they were made, and proved that he was not being followed by either of the two outlaws. Then he went on until he heard the tinkle of the sheep bells.

It was still snowing, and one could scarcely distinguish a sheep from a bush because both were covered with snow. The herd was in a deep draw and the sheep were browsing contentedly despite the storm. As the Phantom went among them they hardly moved. The herder, he was sure, would be below them to keep them from wandering out across the flat, and he approached carefully.

Suddenly the dog came sniffing up to him, without having made a sound, and soon the Phantom saw Jolly pacing up and down under a cut bank. For a few minutes the Phantom stood still and watched. Occasionally Jolly clenched his fists and jerked them viciously downward, and he was muttering incoherent words under his breath. The Phantom's suspicion that Jolly was more than a bit batty seemed to be confirmed. But whether impotent anger or insanity dominated him he was a dangerous man to approach. The Phantom could have killed him easily.

The gun belt around the Phantom's slim waist was buckled to the last hole, and even so the holster dangled low on his hip with an uncomfortable feeling, but it placed the six-shooter conveniently to his hand.

"Jolly," the Phantom called softly.

THE herder swung around and seeing who it was came swiftly forward, shoulders hunched and evil face tucked into the collar of his mackinaw.

"What's up?" the herder rasped suspiciously.

"That's far enough, Jolly," the Phantom said crisply, and the herder's eyes rested upon his own gun with obvious amazement.

"Where'd you git that?" Jolly rumbled.

"It would surprise you," the Phantom said with thin sarcasm.

"Give it here. It's my gun," Jolly rumbled.

"Nix. Listen, Jolly; I'm supposed to kill you with this gun. Could have done it, too, just now, an' don't you forgit that. But I don't want to. What I say is we can get some horses an' get away in this storm. You know the way to the railroad."

"And have you turn me in for doing away with that campmover? Not me."

"Don't be a fool, man. If I don't kill you we'll both be murdered. It's our only chance. If it'll make you feel any better I'm wanted too."

"It couldn't be done. There's a blizzard back on the summit, and we'd get lost. If we wait we'll be snowed in," Jolly declared. "We've got just one chance. *We've got to get those two men.*"

"Ain't it occurred to you that that may be quite a job?"

"It'll be easy. Give me my gun. You have that toy pistol of yours. We'll go back to camp, and you tell them to come outside. I'll be waiting at the side of the wagon, and get the first one. You take the second, and if he don't drop I'll finish him."

Killing! The Phantom was getting sick of the talk. Here were three men with murder in their hearts, and if he were to survive he realized that they would all have to die. If he should kill Jolly now, he knew that he would be but a slavey for the other two until spring, and then they would dispose of him. The Phantom knew the depth of iniquity to which the human mind could sink. His own problem, he believed, could only be solved by causing the men to destroy each other.

"If I could trust you, Jolly, we might come to terms," he said. "If I helped you kill them I'd have to watch out all winter. No; I'm going to stall till the storm's over. I'll tell 'em I dassn't take a chance till I can see you plain. Maybe we'll be able to git away then."

"Give me your little gun then," Jolly pleaded. "They won't know I've got it, and I tell you it's our only chance."

"I don't know," the Phantom said slowly. "I could give you my gun all right, but it wouldn't do you no good. You couldn't use it. An' about it bein' our only chance, I dunno. I forgot to tell you the sheriff was here while you were away. He said he might come back this way."

"What?" the man roared. "You squealed on me!" He sprang forward with blind fury. Just in time the Phantom jerked out the revolver and fired. The bullet grazed Jolly's cheekbone, and turned him around. The big herder grabbed the wounded place with a loud groan. The Phantom stood back, watching the big man's every move like a cat. He had shot to kill, but having failed to strike dead center he was content to wait for the other to show his intentions.

"You shouldn't have done that," Jolly murmured at last.

"Listen yuh big bum. I shoulda killed yuh in yore tracks. I didn't give yuh away to the sheriff. I told him these sheep belonged to a man named Smith an' that yore name was just Bill. But if he does come back this way I'm goin' out with him. Git that? Now go back to the camp an' tell them two crooks up there that I took a shot at you. I'll watch the sheep."

Jolly moved away toward the camp, from time to time stopping to press fresh snow against his wound.

The Phantom smiled. The two outlaws would at least think he had tried to murder Jolly and had bungled the job. Just what would happen when Jolly reached the camp he didn't know—or greatly care. He would stay with the sheep until night. Somehow or other he was always more contented when with the sheep than at other times. Despite the cold he liked to watch the woolly animals with their big, dumb eyes as they grazed with such perfect contentment, and bovine faith that their destiny was safe in the hands of their herder.

"Poor fools," the Phantom thought, "they're doomed to starvation, but

they're just as happy I reckon." Nevertheless he wished that it might be otherwise. He felt sorry for them, and somehow or other had for them a sort of wistful, protective feeling.

ALONG toward evening he turned the herd back toward the camp, and half an hour before the early winter darkness fell he went on around to the camp. It was not snowing so heavily now and he could see the camp quite clearly when a hundred yards away.

Then suddenly a horseman materialized out of the storm on the other side of the camp. With a gasp of dismay the Phantom knew that it was the sheriff. He started to shout a warning, but his tongue clove to his mouth. It would be too late anyway. The officer was only a few rods from the camp, and was already calling to the men inside. The Phantom broke into a run and reached the back of the camp unseen, just as the sheriff was climbing out of the saddle.

"By George this is a twister on the ridges," the sheriff was saying. "Lucky I found your camp." He had paused to tie his horse to a front wagon wheel, and his face was almost entirely encrusted with ice. He pawed at his moustache with his hand and climbed stiffly up on the double-trees preparatory to entering the camp.

"Yeah, mebbe it was, Sheriff. Come on in," called a mocking voice.

The Phantom saw Sheriff Hoffman teeter backward on the wagon tongue and almost fall. Then the officer caught himself and planted one foot on the floor of the camp.

"Why, hello, Ivars," he said coolly. "Didn't expect to find you here."

"No? Well, we wasn't expectin' to meet you either. Come on in."

"Thanks. Didn't know you boys had gone into the sheep business."

"Neither did we till lately. But come on in an' be comfortable. Let me relieve you of yore overcoat—an' that gun."

"Just as you say. Yuh seem to be runnin' things," the sheriff said in an even tone. But the Phantom knew that Hoffman had been covered from the instant he appeared in the camp door. It would have been suicide for the officer to resist.

For all that the Phantom had been out in the cold for hours he was now feverishly hot as he wondered what the outcome of the strange meeting inside the camp would be. He had liked Sheriff Hoffman because of his cool fearlessness, but it seemed to him that the officer was doomed. There were already too many mouths to feed, and they certainly wouldn't allow him to live to endanger their safety.

The Phantom was keenly aware of the six-shooter at his hip. He had always considered officers of the law his natural enemies. Hoffman, if he got a chance, might send him back to K. C. and that might mean the hot seat. On the other hand it was certain death now whether the two strangers or Jolly ultimately came out on top, and the Phantom much preferred to ally himself with the sheriff than with any of the others. Accomplishing anything against the alert outlaws was something altogether different. He would have to wait until he could make some sort of signal to the sheriff.

MEANWHILE he climbed up on the boot on the back of the camp wagon, pressed his ear against the canvas, and listened carefully.

"What's the big idee anyway, Hoffman?" the man Wilk demanded.

"Me bein' here? Purty much of an accident. A while back I figgered you two boys might have cut through here. If you had grub for yoreselves I thought you might aim to winter here because there's horse feed and plenty water. I convinced myself you hadn't come this way, an' when I failed to find you up north I decided that you'd give me the slip complete."

"Then what brought you back here?"

"This sheep camp. By the way, where's the kid who was with these sheep the other day?"

"He's out with 'em now," Ivars answered.

"And this other fellow? What's wrong with your face buddy?"

"That damned kid tried to murder me, Sheriff," Jolly groaned. "These two fellows came in here and took possession of my camp. Then they got my campmover to try to murder me."

"Yeah? Wilk, you an' Ivars are gittin' worse all the time. Some of these days you're going to git yoreselves hung," the sheriff warned.

"Not by you, Sheriff, not by you," Ivars laughed.

"Oh, I don't know. After all you boys haven't sunk to the level where you could murder an unarmed man."

"Yuh don't think we'll let you go out of here an' come back with a posse, do you?" Wilk sneered.

"I won't need no posse," the sheriff said quietly. "I'll take you in alone or not at all."

"It's a funny situation, Sheriff," Ivars remarked. "It looks like we're all in here for the winter, an' there ain't enough grub to do but two men unless we live on dead sheep. An' personally, I never did like mutton."

"Oh, don't bother about the grub," Sheriff Hoffman said. "There'll be plenty of men in here to get more grub."

"What's that?" Wilk shouted.

"Just the sheriff havin' his little joke," Ivars said.

"I'm not jokin', make sure of that," Hoffman said. "I started to tell yuh why I'm here. You see when I found this herd of sheep here the other day it looked mighty queer to me. Nobody with good sense would take chances on winterin' a band in here. The story that young campjack told me was still queerer. So when I give up findin' you two hoss thieves I begun inquirin' around about the sheep. Wasn't long till I found a man named Hansen lookin' for his herd. Seemed like he'd plumb lost 'em. They was supposed to be a hundred an' fifty miles north of here, but I had a hunch this was his herd."

"It's a lie," Jolly roared. "This herd belongs to me."

"I suppose so," the sheriff said. He had ridden hard and far that day, and he was terribly weary. The listening Phantom could tell that from the tone of his voice.

"Still," Hoffman went on in the same tired monotone, "I was sure they were his sheep even when the description of his campmover didn't tally at all with the one he gave. But I happened to remember just how the camp here looked, and about all that was in it. Particularly remembered all these books, and the girl pictures on the wall. Hansen knew then that it was his outfit."

"It's a lie I tell you," Jolly shouted.

"Aw, dry up," Ivars said disgustedly. "You ain't foolin' nobody, shep. We all know the sheep have been stole. You put up a good story, too, Sheriff. I suppose you'll tell us that Hansen is on his way here with a crew of men to try to get his sheep back?"

"That's right," the sheriff said.

"There's one thing wrong with that, Hoffman. If that was true you'd have waited an' come with 'em."

"At the latest it'll only be day after tomorrow before you can find out whether I'm lyin' or not," the sheriff said. "By the way have you had supper?"

"Not yet," Ivars replied. "Waitin' for the kid to come in with the sheep. Orta be along any minute now, so I'll start it. Just rest yoreself back on the bed with the herder there."

THE Phantom jumped down to the ground. He had never been so amazed in his life. Here were four men with death hovering over them, and yet they were quietly getting ready to eat supper. The sheriff, especially, must know that his life hung by a hair, yet he hadn't betrayed the least bit of excitement.

The Phantom had wondered why the outlaws hadn't killed the sheriff the moment he appeared, but he decided that it was because they wanted to question him first; wanted to find out if other men were coming. He had told them there was. Now the question was; had he been telling the truth, or running a bluff? In either event the outlaws had everything to lose by letting the sheriff live. For the time being Jolly was almost overlooked. He was unarmed and wounded; therefore not dangerous.

The sheep camp was a veritable powder magazine. One awkward move by anybody might precipitate a slaughter, and for the present the advantage was all with the two outlaws.

"Hey, Ivars," the Phantom called softly, as he reached the front end of the camp.

"Oh, you here?" the man said, sticking his head out of the camp.

"I tried to pull that job, but I missed a little," the Phantom whispered. "What am I goin' to do?"

"First place turn that horse out with the others. He belongs to the sheriff so treat him right. An' then," the man leaned far over and whispered, "watch yoreself. Hoffman knows these sheep have been stolen. It's stick with us or go to the pen."

"Sure I'll stick," the Phantom declared.

"Then don't let him git his hands on that gun. He talks easy, but he's a fightin' fool. Git this—that sheriff is gonna make a fight, an' we mean to git him. If you're around when the fireworks start leave him to us—but you finish Jolly. Git it?"

"I git yuh."

When the Phantom returned the lamp had been lit inside the camp, and the men were beginning to eat. A sheep camp table is built for only two. It lets down from the side of the camp and a swinging leg holds it in place six inches above the projection. A man can be seated at either end of it on the projection. Now Ivars was seated at the table next to the door, and the sheriff faced him from the other side of the table. Wilk sat on the opposite projection with his plate on a syrup bucket, and Jolly was still on the bed. The herder had got a bandage around his wound, but it gave him great difficulty in eating. His eyes were full of poisonous hatred as he glared at the Phantom.

The little camp was cramped quarters for five men.

"You'll have to wait till we finish, Slim," Ivars said. "Climb back on the bed with Jolly."

Jolly was propped up with his back against the bows on the side of the camp occupied by Wilk. The Phantom naturally climbed to the other side of the bed. As he edged past the sheriff he gave the officer an almost imperceptible wink, and at the same time touched the handle of the gun with a significant forefinger. The sheriff manifested just a bit of hesitancy, and then returned to his eating, but there was a new tenseness about his posture.

SOMETHING seemed to itch the Phantom. He had two shirt buttons loose, and he was scratching under his shirt. He saw Jolly watching him, and suddenly the man put down his plate.

"Listen, you fellows," Jolly addressed the two outlaws. "Do you know you're bein' double-crossed?"

"What d'ye mean?" the surly Wilk boomed.

"This sheriff is lyin' about any more men comin'. Hansen, the man who owns these sheep, has gone back to Denmark on a visit. He left me in charge of 'em all winter."

"So you were runnin' a little bluff, were yuh, Sheriff?" Ivars purred dangerously.

"I'm still runnin' it," Hoffman retorted.

"Another thing," Jolly shot out. "That kid there knew the sheriff was coming, and he means to help him. He tried to kill me after he'd tried to get me to help him against you two and I'd refused."

"I didn't favor givin' him that gun," Wilk blurted.

"Don't worry about that," Jolly sneered. "He's got another one—an automatic there under his shirt."

The Phantom read his death sentence in the eyes of the two outlaws. At his hip was a loaded gun, under his shoulder an empty one. Every instinct urged him to reach for the one which might give him a chance. But from the time he had seated himself upon the bed he had reasoned that his only chance was to cooperate with the sheriff. He was in such a position that Hoffman, with a quick grab, could reach the handle of the Colt at his hip. There would still be a chance that the Phantom might bluff somebody with his own gat.

It was a supreme test of sheer grit and nerve. Yet he reached under his left arm with his right hand and cuddled the butt of the useless weapon.

The Phantom had been less than a second in making his decision, but that was long enough to permit other things to happen. With a sweep of his hand the sheriff had knocked the swinging table leg down. Two hot cups of coffee, and a number of other dishes slid to the floor.

The reaction of the two outlaws was strange in such a situation, but entirely natural. Both men made a swift grab to catch the dishes. Instantly the sheriff brought the edge of both hands sharply down, one upon the back of Ivar's neck, the other upon Wilk's. It brought both men to their knees on the floor. Then Hoffman's hand flashed back and closed around the butt of the revolver in the Phantom's holster.

The Phantom had brought out his automatic as he jerked his legs back out of the way on the bed.

"Surrender, men!" the sheriff warned sharply, but the two outlaws had no

such intention. They surged to their feet, and now each man had a gun in his hand. Both were in deadly mood and determined to rectify their mistake.

SHERIFF HOFFMAN was still cool. He knew that he could get only one of the men, so he chose the one he thought the more dangerous —Ivars. This, also, would give the Phantom a chance at Wilk, because the sheriff was directly between him and Ivars.

Three guns exploded like three quick bangs upon a drum—the sheriff's first by a period of time less than the detonation of his gun lasted; then Ivars', and lastly Wilk's.

But as the three guns came up the Phantom had desperately hurled his gun straight at the face of Wilk. It had struck the man on the bridge of the nose with excruciating pain, and his bullet had torn a hole through the canvas wall a foot above the sheriff's head.

The sheriff's shot had buried itself in Ivars' breast and the horse thief had fallen backward across the stove, and from there rolled to the floor. But the sheriff, in turn, had got a bullet through the flesh along his shoulder.

As the Phantom's gun struck Wilk in the face the man lurched backward and knocked the wall lamp out of its bracket. It fell to the floor, and the camp was in darkness save for a tongue of flame that reached up and licked at the blankets on the bed. Two more bullets slashed the darkness from Wilk's gun, but both went to one side of the sheriff. That cool-headed individual had jerked a quilt from the bed, and with one swift dab had smothered the flames. Before Wilk could fire again the sheriff was against him, and the men clinched.

The Phantom had tried to reach the door, but before he could leave the bed he found himself clutched by the iron hands of Jolly. He kicked and squirmed and fought like a wildcat, driving his fists into the herder's face, and when that failed he resorted to biting, but he was no physical match for the powerful herder. He was drawn back upon the bed, and finally Jolly's muscular fingers clutched his throat. The pain of torn tissues was terrible, but as nothing compared to the agony of suffocation which quickly followed. He struggled desperately, but to no avail. He sensed that he could expect no help from the sheriff for a terrific struggle was going on in the other end of the camp.

The Phantom was nearly spent. Yet, blindly, instinctively, he continued to fight the one kind of battle he knew. He was still driving his long, sharp-nailed thumbs desperately upward in the fading hope that he might reach an eye. And suddenly he did. Jolly had brought his face nearer as he sought to increase the already fearful pressure on his victim's throat, and those two properly spaced thumbs had each found an eye, and the long nails dug deep into the man's eye-balls.

It was too much to endure. Jolly released his hold and put his hands to his eyes. The man was more than half blinded. The Phantom rolled over and tried to massage his tortured throat till he could breathe again.

The two fighting men in the center of the camp suddenly crashed to the floor. The sheriff was underneath, but his coolness hadn't forsaken him for a moment. Both men had retained possession of their guns. Finding himself on top Wilk saw his chance. He thrust his gun against the sheriff's body, but just as he went to pull the trigger Hoffman brushed the muzzle aside and the bullet ripped into the floor. The same instant Hoffman's gun nudged into the outlaw's ribs, and Wilk had no time to brush it aside. The bullet roamed upward through the man's heart.

WITH an effort the sheriff lifted the body off of him and got to his knees, just in time to see the vague outlines of a man plunging from the bed toward the door. His gun roared twice. Jolly fell against him and then slithered to the floor.

"Where are yuh, kid?" the sheriff said.

"Here," squeaked the Phantom in a weak voice.

After some difficulty the sheriff located the lamp and managed to light it. Without a chimney it afforded only a wavery, eerie light, but it was sufficient to disclose the three men on the floor.

"Ricked up like cordwood," the sheriff commented grimly. "But all dead," he said after an examination.

There was admiration, not unmixed with fear, in the Phantom's eyes as they

gazed upon the fighting sheriff. But his fingers still nursed his bruised throat.

"What's the matter with yore neck, youngster?" the sheriff queried kindly.

"Jolly got me," was the reply.

"Well, I'll say he did," the sheriff said after an examination. "Some hot cloths'll help that a lot. I'll fix yuh up soon as I drag these cattle out where they'll freeze an' keep. Guess they'll be all right under the wagon. Then we'll clean up."

"Guess he'd have got me if I hadn't managed to gouge my thumbs into his eyes," the Phantom bragged a bit doubtfully.

"It was a dawggoned good scrap, an' I don't mind admittin' that I'd 'a' been dawg meat if it hadn't been for you," the sheriff said warmly. "But what made yuh throw yore gun at Wilk instead o' shootin' him?"

"Well, yuh see, Sheriff, it was empty. All my ca'tridges was gone."

For a minute the sheriff regarded the Phantom with stupefied amazement. "An' you took a chance on givin' me the other gun," he said marveling.

"Well, they didn't know it was empty the Phantom said sheepishly.

"Yo're all right, kid. Yuh've got the kind o' guts that count," Sheriff Hoffman approved.

The Phantom thrilled. He had the good will of the sheriff now. If only he could hold it till he reached the railroad.

An hour later, when the camp had been cleaned up and they were eating their belated supper the Phantom asked, "When did you say those sheepmen would be here, Sheriff?"

"Not until I go after 'em," the sheriff said. "Jolly called me all right. Hansen is in Europe. But I knew there was something fishy about you bein' here, an' I made inquiries about all the herds that had come down the trail last fall. This was the only one that couldn't be accounted for. I found out what the herder and campmover were supposed to look like so I drifted back this way to have a look. Jolly was the herder all right, but you don't answer the description of the campmover."

"No, sir. Jolly murdered the campmover. I drifted up to his camp lookin' for a handout an' I had to stay." The Phantom gave the sheriff a long, sidelong glance. His only chance to get back to civilization was through the sheriff's help. He was familiar with the official look of the policeman, and he expected to see it now, but the sheriff's expression didn't change.

"Tell me about it," Hoffman invited.

Without hesitation the Phantom related all that had befallen since his unfortunate arrival at the sheep camp. The sheriff was silent for some time after he had finished.

"Yuh don't like sheep then?" Hoffman queried finally.

"Huh?" The Phantom was startled. "Why, yes, I like sheep all right. I didn't mind bein' with them, but I was shore worried about gittin' out of here."

"I know. But just where was yuh anxious to git?"

"Well, no place in particular. California, mebbe."

"Then you're not from Los Angeles like you told me?"

Was this a sort of third degree? A cold chill began to creep into the Phantom's voice. "No. I'm from the East."

"I thought so. Now listen, son; I've got to break a way out through this snow with these bodies, an' send word to Hansen's folks about these sheep. It may be two weeks before I can git back. Meantime, there's these sheep. We can't leave them alone, an' we can't take 'em out now."

"I gitcha, Sheriff. You want me to stay here with 'em."

"You've got plenty guts, kid. I believe yuh've got enough to do that."

"Sure, I'll stay," the Phantom agreed.

"And when we git back—then what?"

A dull flush came over the Phantom's face. "I dunno. Hit the road I reckon."

"It's a tough game at best, an' in the winter it's plumb hell," Sheriff Hoffman warned. "I got a hunch, kid, you've never been outa the city much. How'd yuh like to try country life for a steady diet?"

"How'd yuh mean?" the Phantom asked suspiciously.

"Well, I own quite a ranch down south about a hundred miles," Hoffman said. "When yuh get through here I'd be glad to give you a job."

Suddenly the Phantom found himself wanting to take that offer more than he had ever wanted anything in his life, but his innate caution held him back. "I'll think it over while you're away," he promised.

THE storm lasted three days, and the sheriff couldn't leave until that time, and he had a bad arm anyway. When he finally got away with the bodies of the three dead men it was more than two weeks before he returned with men to take over the herd. It had been a difficult job breaking a road in, and Hoffman was anxious to get started back. Yet they took time to count the sheep and found only a few missing. Hansen's brother, who had come to take over the herd, handed the Phantom a hundred-dollar bill.

"You sure saved this outfit a loss," he said warmly. "We've had one big storm an' ain't likely to have another one as bad. I think the sheep will pull through."

"Thanks," the Phantom said. During those two weeks he had had plenty of time to think. But he was a little surprised that nobody suggested holding him as a witness with regard to the murder of the campmover. He heard Hoffman say that it would do no good to search for the body until spring. Yet Hoffman was asking him if he had made up his mind yet about what he was going to do. They accepted his story that he wouldn't be able to tell the place if he saw it.

"It all depends, Sheriff," the Phantom said nervously. "I'd like to, but there's something I got to tell you. I'm wanted."

"Yeah? What terrible crime you been guilty of?"

"I'm called the Phantom, but my real name is Ollie Margetts, and the gang I run with bumped a couple of birds off. They'd squealed about some bootleggin', an' some of the boys took 'em for a ride. Somehow the police found out it was members of our gang. I got a tip just in time an' beat it. I give yuh my word, Sheriff, I didn't know anything about the murder till after it was over, but it's just up to you now whether I take that job or go back to K. C."

The sheriff smiled. "We do things a bit different out here," he said. "We kill our own snakes, an' expect them in the East to do the same. We judge a man by what he shows himself to be, an' I take yore word about that affair. Let's travel Ollie."

Two days later they stopped at the sheriff's ranch. The Phantom gazed around with much satisfaction. They had crossed the railroad ten miles back, but he hadn't noticed it.

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WE WANT YOUR OPINION OF IT

THE OUTLAW

by GRIFF CRAWFORD

Think you're a foolin' me, lookin' so mild,
Innocent like and as meek as a child,
Standin' as quiet and nice as can be,
Sort of asleep—but you bet I can see
Fire in you're eyes that's a-gleamin' and tells
Me you'll be handin' me one of your spells.

I'm gonna straddle you—don't you forget,
It's been a year, and you ain't done it—yet.
All of your rantin' and buckin' around,
Never a time have you showed me the ground,
Never a time have you dumped me or made
This rannie grab leather—I'm sort of afraid—

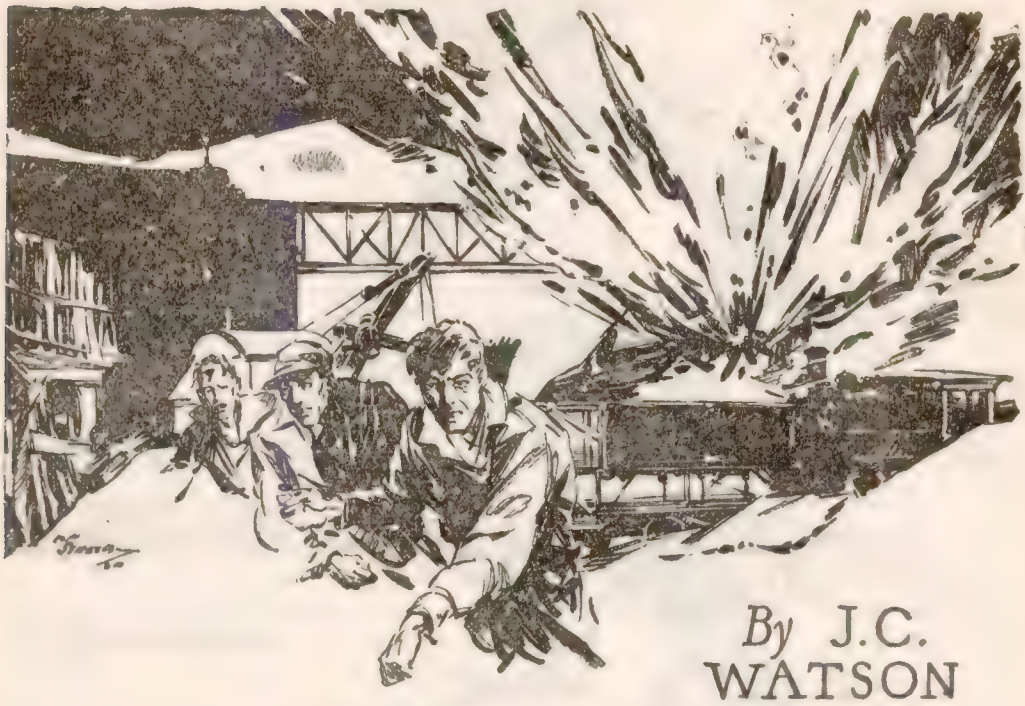
You've met with a gent who is better'n you;
I'm mountin' you, bronc, and I'm ridin' you, too.
—You liked to have done it—that time—I'll admit—
By makin' a leap—when I hadn't got sit
In the saddle—that's good, you're a-showin' your stuff—
—Your sunfish and others ain't nearly enough—

—When the man on your back is a buster like me—
I'm ridin' you out—and I'm ridin' you free—
Look out! You old devil—your foxy—I'll swear—
You come mighty near it—I coppered you there—
Oh, no!—not that time—hit it hard as you can—
You're pitchin' a hard-settin', bronc-bustin' man.

—I gotta admire you—you son-of-a-gun!
That's right—do the wiggle, then buck as you run—
Paw air—if—you wanta—I'm still on your—back,
—Come down with your feet—all bunched up—in a track—
—Well, damned if you didn't!—I'm over the top—
When I land on the mesa I reckon I'll stop——

BAM!——There you stand lookin' simple and mild
And innocent like and as meek as a child—
Your laughin'!—Don't lie—when you wiggle your chin
Your smilin'—that's always the way that you grin.
No hard feelin's—bronc—you are lucky—and fast—
It took you a year but you flopped me at last.

The COYOTE HOLE



By J.C. WATSON

Author of "Woodsmoke," "Turn About," etc.

A high-ball boss and a crazy kid, plus a couple of tons of dynamite!

THE sleepy mountain solitude of the Buzzard River country had been rudely awakened by the invasion of hundreds of working men. The Buzzard Dam was growing day by day; but as yet it was still in the skeleton stage. Two fills of rock, like parallel railroad embankments a hundred feet apart, reached clear across the river from one steep mountain-side to the other.

The empty trough between them was gradually being filled in, ton by ton, month by month, until the two fills should eventually become one solid barrier.

At one end of the upstream fill, where the artificial bank joined up with the solid mountain, Clem Reeves sat on an upturned powder box, puffing away at a corn-cob pipe.

Immediately behind his shoulder, in the hill-side, was a small tunnel. An innocent looking hole—this "coyote hole"—but at its far end it contained a load of dynamite which would presently shatter the mountain's solid rock into hundreds of tons of dirt wherewith to help the filling-in process.

The charge was all ready to be set off. Bud Stanley, Clem's young helper, was still in the hole. Clem could hear him tinkering around with a shovel at some trifling job which was quite unnecessary, for there was nothing for either of them to do until Martin, the shift boss, came along with orders about firing the shot.

Clem, shading his eyes from the sun glare with an earth-stained hand, looked off along the top of the fill. It was like a broad, rocky-surfaced highway with a narrow-gage railroad running along its inside shoulder, close to the edge of the dump. Over at the far end he saw the foreman coming.

"Hey, Bud!" Clem shouted over his shoulder. "Better come on out here now. Martin's comin'."

From somewhere up in the dark tunnel Bud answered. Clem sat and watched Martin coming, stepping briskly along the narrow-gage ties, taking in every detail of the work. Over on the far

bank a steam shovel snorted, spouting black clouds of oily smoke into the blue sky as it loaded the waiting train of dump cars with rock and dirt.

Bud Stanley emerged from the tunnel, blinking in the sunlight.

"It won't be long now," he grinned.

Clem glanced up at him. The kid was trying to appear cool and calm, as if he had been a miner for years instead of just a few weeks, but the sparkle of excitement in his eyes gave him away.

"I'm mighty glad of it too," Clem answered gruffly, pulling hard on his corn-cob.

Bud pulled the little carbide lamp out of his miners' cap and turned the flame out.

"Why, what's the matter?" he asked, pushing the cap to the back of his curly head and squatting down on one heel. "Everythin's gone fine ain't it?"

"Everythin' has gone fine—luckily," Clem answered sourly, "but no thanks to you. A lad like you keeps a feller on pins and needles half the time."

"What you mean?" Bud asked sulkily.

CLEM turned and looked squarely at him. "You mind what yore mom said to me when we was leavin' yore home, six weeks ago? She said, 'Keep a good lookout fer Buddy and bring him back safe'. She'd never have let you come only there had to be some money fer seedin', this spring. Yore mom and me's been close neighbors fer fifteen years now. I ain't never forgot how she stood by me when I had typhoid that time. Well, I promised to look out fer you; mighty little thinkin' what a job I was lettin' myself in fer. I been lookin' to see you blow yoreself up a dozen times, the careless way you handles powder."

"Aw, Mom always wants to treat me like a kid," Bud resented, kicking a rock with his toe.

"You gotta remember yo're the only one she got," Clem pointed out seriously. "Who'd there be left to run the farm? She'd be all alone in the world if you went and got yoreself bumped off by yore own durned carelessness."

"Who's careless?" Bud retorted indignantly. You talk like a skeery old woman half the time."

Clem's jaw tightened. He fixed two steely-gray eyes on young Bud, and his lean, tanned face hardened in rocky lines.

"Listen, kid! After this shot goes off we'll be all through on this job, and on our way home tomorrer. I promised to look out fer you and, by Gawd, I'm gonna get you home safe tomorrer if it's the last thing I ever do. If anythin' happened so that I couldn't—well, I guess I'd feel like I could never go back there and show my face again. I'll tell the world I'll breathe a whole lot easier after I fire this shot."

"After *you* fire the shot?" Bud echoed suddenly downcast. "Why you promised long ago that I'd fire the big shot."

"I know I did, Bud," Clem said, weakening. " 'Tain't that I want to disappoint you, lad, but yo're so durned careless."

"Aw heck, Clem!" Bud implored. "There ain't no danger to just touchin' a match to a fuze. You promised me all along."

After all maybe, there wasn't really any danger and the kid had set his heart on it. "Oh, all right then," Clem conceded reluctantly, "but if there's any possible way of findin' trouble you'll find it all right—and I'll be left to pick up the pieces."

Martin walked up. He pushed his sweat-stained felt hat up off his black, beetling brows and sat down on a flat rock beside them.

"Everything ready?" he asked crisply. Clem nodded without speaking. He didn't like Martin overmuch; had no confidence in him. There had been too many accidents on the job, most of them due to Martin's "safety last", hurry-up methods. "Well then, here's the idee, boys. Murphy and Humphreys have got another big charge on the downstream side of you, as you know. Now if we set two charges off at the same time, the double shock would crack the rock up between you and them. They're only a hundred feet off and we don't want that rock cracked, else the sides of the dam will leak like a sieve, see?"

Clem and Bud both nodded.

"That's why we're using long fuze instead of an electric battery. What I want is this here——Which one of you is going to light the fuze?"

"Me," Bud said promptly, stepping forward.

"All right!" Martin addressed Bud. "You wait until Murphy's shot goes off, see? You'll be up the tunnel standing by your own fuze, all ready to touch the match to it. As soon as you hear their shot—light your fuze immediate and come out. You got ten feet of fuze; that gives you ten minutes to get in the clear."

"HOLD on a minute!" Clem objected. "You mean to say that the lad has got to be standin' by his fuze when Murphy's shot goes off? What's the matter with him waitin' here at the mouth, just under the roof fer protection from flyin' rocks?"

"He'll be plenty safe enough where he is," Martin said sharply. "What's the danger?"

"With a ton of dynamite goin' off close by?" Clem spoke indignantly. "Why danger of the roof fallin' in acourse. This here roof is bound to be loose in places with all the shootin' we done in this tunnel."

"Bunk!" Martin answered impatiently. "Didn't I test it yesterday? That roof is as solid as can be."

"Mebbe it seems solid but you can't allus tell. Best have the lad at the tunnel mouth, Martin, and take no chances."

"He's going to be at his fuze, where I say." Martin wheeled on Bud, his black eyebrows lowering. "D'you hear, lad?"

"Sure I'll be there," Bud promised willingly.

Martin turned back to Clem. "While these shots are going off I've got close on five hundred men standing idle at a safe distance. I certainly ain't going to have them off the job a minute longer than I have to. Get that, feller!"

"And you get this, Martin," Clem shot back. "That kid is gonna wait in the mouth of the tunnel where it's safe. If that don't suit you, light the blasted fuze yourself."

"Listen, Reeves!" The muscles of Martin's jaw were working angrily. "Did you take this tunneling job by contract or did you not? Answer me that."

"Certainly I did. What of it?"

"Just this. Your contract calls for tunneling and shooting. If you don't fire that shot—and fire it just the way I say—you've broke your contract, and you don't get a nickel for your work. Laugh that off!"

Martin glared from one to the other and pulled out his watch. "I'm going to tell Murphy to fire now," he said walking away. "You got about ten minutes to decide."

He strode off angrily down a narrow path across the hillside to where Murphy and Humphreys were waiting for him. Clem puffed fiercely at his pipe and watched him go.

"He's got us there, kid. We sure ain't gonna let all that money go just fer the sake of takin' a chance. But I'm gonna take the chance, not you."

"Oh no you ain't. You promised I'd light that fuze and I'm gonna do it." Bud's jaw was set squarely; his eyes glinted and his whole body seemed stiff and inflexible with resolve. Clem knew that the kid could be as stubborn as a mule.

"Listen, kid!" Clem spoke more gently, laying a big hand on his shoulder. "When I promised you should fire that shot I didn't know as Martin had any such crazy idees in his bone head as that. It's fine and dandy you bein' game to take chances but you got to think of the old widder lady at home, waitin' fer you."

"Yo're just makin' a big fuss about nothin'," Bud replied pettishly. "That roof ain't never goin' to fall. Martin knows what he's talkin' about."

"Martin don't know nothin', the big stiff! Them fellers wouldn't have been killed a week ago if Martin hadn't put 'em in a place that everyone said was unsafe."

"Well, this is different. This is safe enough and—and I'm gonna light that fuze."

CLEM felt furious and baffled. What the kid wanted, he thought, was a good stiff punch on the chin to teach him a lesson.

"I promised yore mom to not let you take no chances, Bud, and to get you back home safe, and by Gawd, I'm gonna do just that. It don't make no difference what you say or think, I'm gonna handle this job myself."

"Like hell you are," Bud answered with flashing eyes.

Martin, who had been giving his instructions to Murphy, turned away and walked to the edge of the downstream

fill. He raised his cupped hands to his mouth and yelled, "Fire!" in a voice that echoed across the river. Murphy entered his coyote hole to set his own charge off.

Immediately all the racket of the big construction job died off into complete silence. The steam shovel ceased its busy snorting; the dinky locomotive hauling the train of dump cars came to a chugging stop; the clattering jackhammers, ringing out from various rock faces, fell silent.

Down below in the trough between the two fills, batteries of giant hydraulics played continuous streams of water on the dump face, so that the soil and mud drained down to the middle of the trough, leaving the rock on the outside, with an impervious mud core on the inside. These mighty streams of water dwindled down to mere trickles as the men attending them, in gleaming slickers, shut off the water and commenced to walk away. The dump gang dropped their tools and departed.

In ten minutes the first big shot would blow up. Clem looked at Bud. The kid was more excited than angry now. Martin was coming back to them.

"Listen here, Clem," Bud begged seizing Clem's thick arm in both hands. "We're gonna go home tomorrow, ain't we? But after I got my seedin' done on the farm I won't have nothin' much else to do till harvest, will I?"

"Well, what about it?" Clem asked, shaking Bud's hands off. He wasn't going to give in to the kid's pleading if he could help it. Bud was too damn careless.

"I figger on comin' back here to work till harvest, that's what. Martin'll give me a good job, unless you queer me all up with him. Don't you see, Clem? Now that Martin knows that it's me that was goin' to fire this shot—if you turn around and treat me like a blamed kid that can't be trusted—well, hell! What sort of a punk job would he give me next time? Have a heart, Clem! There ain't no danger."

"I wisht I could think there wasn't, Bud," Clem insisted, "but there is; plenty danger."

"Well then, by heck, we'll both stand by that blamed fuze," Bud answered hurriedly in a low suppressed voice. Martin was very near now. "I ain't gonna be left out of it."

BEFORE Clem could answer Martin was with them. He was still scowling blackly.

"You decided what you're going to do yet?" he demanded acidly. "Are you going to light that fuze—or am I?"

"I'm gonna light it," Bud answered hastily and lit the lamp in his cap.

"Well you better be off down the hole then," Martin ordered, "and stand ready."

"Bud nodded and with a final beseeching look at Clem he set off. Clem closed his teeth and said nothing. After all he might be exaggerating the danger. The roof was pretty solid all right. Maybe it was just his natural anxiety for Bud that had worked him up into a state of nerves. Anyway, he didn't want to make the kid look like a fool in front of Martin.

Martin pulled out his watch. "We got six minutes," he said. "We may as well beat it from here and get in the clear. You coming, Reeves?"

"No, I'm gonna stay here till the lad comes out," Clem answered shortly.

Martin pulled out a plug of tobacco and bit off a chew.

"Here is as good as anywhere, I guess." He walked under the protection of the overhanging roof of rock and sat down on the ground. Clem continued to stand just in the entrance. Up in the blackness of the coyote hole he could hear Bud shuffling his feet—waiting.

"One minute more," Martin said briefly, putting his watch away. Clem didn't answer. He was remembering the picture of the stoop-shouldered old lady, standing in the doorway of her log cabin, waving to Bud, with an old battered can of chicken feed under her arm. That was about all the work she could handle on the farm any more—feeding chickens! If anything happened to Bud—well, Clem would just as soon sit himself down on a case of powder and touch a match to it, after the promise he'd given.

Boom!

It was a buried, muffled explosion, deep down in the bowels of the mountain, but the concussion shocked their ear drums. The ground under their feet seemed to lift and shudder like an earthquake. Huge rocks rained down outside the tunnel, roaring through the air and thudding into the ground with an awful force.

Then it was all over.

From up the tunnel they heard Bud call "Fire!" and heard his footsteps hurrying towards them. They saw his light appear.

"Not much the matter with that roof," Martin triumphed maliciously, shooting a venomous glance across at Clem as they walked out into the sunshine.

A CLOD of soil rolled down the steep bank and landed on Clem's shoulder. A shovelful fell on Martin's hat. They both looked up the hill-side, and instantly stepped back in horror.

A three foot depth of soil covered the rock, with a straggly growth of fireweed and thin grass upon it. Weeks and weeks of blasting in the tunnel underneath had cracked and loosened it. And now Murphy's shot, shaking the entire mountain-side, had set a great slice of it sliding. With a tumbling, grinding noise it commenced to slither down and fall at their feet. Rocks roots and earth. A score of tons of it!

In an instant the coyote hole was out of sight. Bud Stanley was cut off and effectually sealed inside. And locked in there with him was a ton of dynamite already fired to go off in ten minutes!

"My God, what we going to do?" Martin asked with a pale face.

"Do!" Clem choked. "We gotta dig, and dig like hell. Grab that shovel!"

Clem had already picked up a shovel and was making the dirt fly. Martin picked up another and tore in alongside of him. It seemed an impossible task to move enough of that formidable bulk to reach the tunnel mouth in ten short minutes. Nevertheless they worked away like furies, cursing furiously at the rocks and boulders which slowed them up. Sweat streamed down from Martin's face.

"Mebbe he'll pull that fuze out before it burns down too far," Martin panted.

"Don't talk like a crazy fool," Clem blazed at him. "There was only a foot sticking out. The rest was tamped in solid and packed around with damp dirt. Nobody could pull it out. It would break off in his hands where it was burned through."

After four minutes labor it seemed as if they were making headway. Then just as Clem was beginning to hope again, the cave they had dug collapsed. More and more dirt poured down. They were worse off even than they had been at first.

Martin flung down his shovel. "This ain't no use," he stated hoarsely. "I doubt if a steam shovel would move this lot in time."

Clem dismally realized the truth of this. He commenced lower down digging a smaller hole this time close to the ground.

"We'll shoot it out," he told Martin. "Get half a dozen sticks of powder ready. Quick!"

"That ain't no use neither," Martin argued. "Only fetch more dirt down. Mebbe blow the boy to pieces."

This was true enough. Clem flung down his shovel and looked around him with wild eyes. From inside they could hear Bud calling out desperately but could not make out his words.

"There's not a thing we can do," Martin said. "No use all three of us getting killed. We got just five minutes to get in the clear. He's done for, poor lad!"

"Yes, and you did fer him too—you skunk!" Clem rounded on him furiously.

"Don't talk crazy," Martin answered sullenly, backing off. "Are you coming?"

"I promised the old lady to bring that lad home safe," Clem groaned, hitting his brow with the palm of his hand, "and I ain't gonna leave him."

"You're bughouse. There's nothing you can do here."

"Yes, by Gawd, there is," Clem exclaimed suddenly. "I ain't lost him yet."

CLEM raced off down the rocky slope of the dump. At the foot of it the mud was ankle deep from the washing of the hydraulics. The nearest hydraulic stood, mounted on a low platform of stout planks, about eighty feet away from the coyote hole.

Clem slogged along through the deep mud and climbed on to the raised platform. In a moment he had slewed the great nozzel around and turned on the water full force. The platform trembled under him. The water shot out like a long narrow feather. He raised the nozzle and played the stream directly into the centre of the slide.

A great splashing spout of muddy

water starred out from the point of impact. The water, at tremendous pressure, bored through the loose dirt as if it had been a mound of swans' down.

Martin was hurrying along the top of the dump. "You only got four minutes," he yelled. "You're crazy if you stay down there. The whole mountain'll be down on you when she goes off!"

Clem didn't answer. He clung to the vibrating nozzle, aiming it for one definite spot where the mouth of the coyote hole should be.

He was facing the same difficulty as before. As soon as a fair-sized cave had been washed out, the overhead weight caused the roof to collapse, and the same process had to be started over again. Clem's watch was dangling loose out of his pocket. Only three minutes more to go.

"I'll get him home or go to hell with him," he kept on muttering doggedly to himself.

The hydraulic leaked like a fountain around the swivel joint. Clem was drenched through to the skin already. But all he had interest in now was the rapidly diminishing bulk of earth above the cave.

Two minutes more and that ton of dynamite would blow Bud Stanley out of the tunnel like a bullet out of a rifle. Exposed to that downpour of jagged rocks which would presently descend out of the sky, Clem gave not a thought to his own fate.

"I'll get him home. I'll get him home yet," he kept on mumbling, while the hydraulic, like a piece of field artillery, trembled and hissed beneath his hands.

One minute and a half more! The stream of water had bared the rocks in places. Clem could see the outline of the entrance. But the force of the water had packed the dirt solidly in it.

Would that tough wad never break through? It seemed to be full of rocks and gravel which made it as hard to smash as concrete. The water force broke on it and splashed up in a thick spray.

Then suddenly it pounded its way through. Clem raised the nozzle to see the result. Out of this muddy aperture crawled an object, more like a slimy toad than a man. Clem dropped the nozzle and danced excitedly on the platform.

"Come on, Bud!" he roared out, waving his arms. "You got less'n a minute to make it. Come right here!"

Bud staggered to his feet and came down the dump at a drunken run. He was plastered from head to foot with mud and soaked with water.

"Under this here platform," Clem shouted. "It's our only chance."

Gasping, Bud plowed through the deep mud and came on. Clem jumped down and waited for him. Bud floundered up to the platform. Together they grovelled under this shelter and crouched in the oozy mud.

Boom!

The platform creaked; the mud quaked under their knees. The air became alive with rushing chunks of rock, roaring down upon them from hundreds of feet up in the sky. Fountains of mud splashed up and hit them in their faces as great rocks thudded into it. Rocks crashed down on the planks a foot above their cowering heads with deafening impacts. For a few seconds death rained down thickly within an inch of their cringing bodies.

Then all was quiet once more.

"You ain't hurt, Bud?" Clem asked in dazed astonishment.

"Not a scratch," Bud grinned weakly through his mud.

With wobbly knees they crawled out on the pock-marked mud flat.

"And now, feller, I'm gonna lead you to camp," Clem promised dourly. And then as soon as I beat hell out of that skunk Martin I'm going to get me a pair of handcuffs and *take you home!*"

A new HAYCOX serial is in and will appear in WEST soon!

"Whispering Range"

by

ERNEST HAYCOX

Aug. 20-30

THE TOWN~

The gun-law element in Elkhorn forces David to strut *his* gun-stuff.

THIS STORY SO FAR

ELKHORN was the terminus of one of the great cattle trails from Texas to the rails. David Colby was a lad from Tennessee—a quiet lad, but one who had, with no thought of fighting in mind, practiced with a Colt forty-four forty revolver till he was a veritable gun-wonder. This was his first day in Elkhorn.

Wandering about town David saw many things to impress him with the roughness of this new country. Beth Beaufort's drunken stepfather goes off against her protests and leaves her in the livery yard with a team, a loaded wagon, and her little sister. David helps her unhitch and put the horses up.

And, standing in front of a hardware store where he had been watching the window display, David saw the town marshal shoot down in so-called fair fight a cowboy who had crossed him. David knew that the marshal was so much faster than the cowboy that there could have been no question as to the outcome of the battle.

After the fight the hardware man, Gideon Hathaway by name, came out of the store and spoke to David.

"Well," he remarked, "so Silver Tip Harkness done it again!"

"Who's Silver Tip Harkness?" Dave asked.

"Elkhorn's new town marshal. Hired to maintain law and order. Somebody forgot to explain to him what kind of law and order was meant.

Later in one of the saloons David was sized up by the gun-careless marshal. He ordered liquor, and was not allowed to pay. Suddenly David realized that Silver Tip was celebrating the killing, and that he was about to drink on the gun-fighter's treat. He put down his glass.

TAMER

by WILLIAM CORCORAN

Part II

The marshal looked at him, quizzically.

"What's the matter, Kid? Don't you like my liquor?"

"Nothing of the sort!" replied David, speaking with respect for the marshal's position.

"What are you doing here? What's your name?" Silver Tip inquired.

"My name's David Colby. I'm from Arkansaw. What I'm doing in Elkhorn strikes me as being my own business."

"Oh!" said Harkness. "Is that so? Well, young feller, you might as well learn here and now that such things are my business too. We got laws in this town and I enforce 'em. One of 'em is the vagrancy law. If I ask you any questions you answer 'em!"

TWO red spots appeared on Dave's cheeks. He drew from a pocket a small fistful of gold and silver.

"There's enough visible means of support, and that's all you got a right to inquire into, Mister Marshal. My business is peaceable and I don't care to say any more about it."

Covertly the big man nudged Harkness. The marshal's eyes were hard beneath drooping lids. Reluctantly he acknowledged the silent admonition of his companion. His eyes grew mild, he shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of indifference, and turned his back to Colby.

"Run along, kid!" he ordered. "Run along and keep off the streets after dark and don't get into trouble!" He called to the bartender for another drink.

Dave exchanged one short glance with the large man, who studied him with an odd, unabashed curiosity, and then he turned and made his way directly out of the saloon. He was conscious of many speculative eyes following him. He did not know it, but many eyes had seen that admonishing nudge of the marshal by the large man—and in Elkhorn whatever John Bolson did was worthy of close attention.

After having supper and made friends with J. Christiansen, the proprietor, Dave wandered out on the street again.

Suddenly a band of hard-looking men came riding down on him at a high lope.

Perhaps they were just cowboys hazing a supposed tenderfoot, and perhaps Dave's clash with Silver Tip had instigated the attack.

"Hi, farmer, where you been? We been looking for you—we want you, boy. Don't look scared, we won't hurt you much.

Dave backed against a wall. A loop came soaring at him. He crouched, throwing up his hands, and slipped out of the noose before it drew taut.

"Jest hold that a second!" barked a voice. Another rider to the side drew his gun and swung from the saddle. He advanced upon Dave.

"Pick up that rope, hayseed!" he commanded.

Dave made no reply.

"Pick it up!" snarled the man. He was whipping himself to anger, and he held the gun pointed at Dave's legs.

"No," said Dave. "I certainly won't!"

"The hell you won't?" said the man. "The hell you *will!*" He fired a shot into the planks. The bullet thudded an inch from Dave's foot. Of sheer instinct he sprang aside. The crowd bellowed with laughter, and the man with the gun grinned in appreciation. He made as if to fire again.

"Damn you, leave me alone!" David said between clenched teeth. "Leave me alone before somebody gets hurt. I've stood for enough, and I'm through."

"Yeah?" taunted the man with the gun. "Well, if you won't pick up that rope I'm going to see that you have good reason. You won't be able to!" He raised the gun till it pointed at Dave's middle. Pausing a second, he uttered the word:

"One!"

Dave watched his eyes, standing motionless with feet apart, his elbows crooked at his sides, fists clenched.

"Two!"

A tremor of despairing hatred ran through Dave. Hatred not for this ignorant man before him but for the town where such things could happen. This fellow intended to shoot in another second. Perhaps not to kill, but at least to hurt or maim. There was one thing left for Dave to do, one thing only.

"Three!"

There was a movement on the sidewalk as fast and unexpected as the striking of a snake. The movement ended with a gun in Dave's hand that stabbed the shadows with sudden orange flame. The bullying man had no more than half drawn his trigger when the leaden slug struck his gun and sent it hurtling from his hand. He forgot Dave in stunned surprise as he looked at his empty hand, the fingers of which were wet with blood. He tried to raise the hand and could not. His wrist was temporarily paralyzed from the shock of that impact.

"Git on your horse and ride!" Dave ordered. He was pale, filled with disgust for the role forced upon him. He edged back against the wall once more so that no one might take him unawares. "Git going, all of you!" he ordered the riders, and his gun defied them to disobey.

After escaping from this affair Dave again ran into Beth Beaufort. She was looking for her stepfather, and Dave decided to help her. He made the rounds of the town unsuccessfully. Finally, Myra, a woman allied to Silver Tip and Bolson, who largely out of pure contrariness had taken a liking to David, told him where he could find Beaufort.

Dave found the place, a dark and evil looking back room of a saloon, and was about to enter by the back door when shots thundered within and Beaufort stumbled out and fell at his feet. Thinking quickly Dave slung the man over his shoulder and hurried off. He laid the man down in an alley between two houses and discovered he was dead. Then he carired him to a saloon porch, where a crowd soon formed.

Marshal Harkness pressed through the crowd. He looked coldly at the dead man and fixed a frozen eye on Dave.

"You do this?" he demanded.

"No, I didn't. He was shot in the back running up the alley here."

"See who did it?"

"No. I threw a couple of shots at them and they ran."

"I see!" said Harkness. His eyes were opaque. He bent over the body. The crowd pressed close as latecomers strove to look over the close-packed crowd.

Dave, trying to hold back the mass, could see only the marshal's shoulders. Abruptly Harkness came erect, bellowing at the crowd to draw back. They did so in confusion.

"Well, another case of justifiable homicide, I reckon!" said Harkness. "Card table brawl and the usual wind-up. He was drunk."

"But he didn't fight!" said David. "Why, the man was unarmed!"

"Thought you didn't know anybody in Elkhorn? How come you were looking for this fella a few minutes ago?"

"I only met them in the livery yard, I don't rightly know them. I said I'd tell them how he was getting along. They knew he was drunk."

Harkness looked at Dave for a moment, closely.

"All right!" he said. "Beat it!"

Next day Dave rode out of town to look over the country. He ran into a trail herd and made friends with the

men. And he found a deserted ranch that looked like a good proposition. When he got back he discovered Beth Beaufort trying to keep house temporarily in an unfurnished house.

That night two things happened to him. First, Bolson got him into a poker game, and tried unsuccessfully to clean him; and second, the woman Myra tried to pump him about how much money he had, and his intentions. But she only got pumped, herself, for her trouble. David extracted from her the information that the ranch he had seen was one that Bolson was in the habit of selling to settlers. Their cattle would catch Texas fever from the trail herds; they would be wiped out of business, and leave; and then Bolson would fake up a new title and resell the ranch to someone else.

Chapter VIII

THE KILLING

DAVE felt the need of talking to someone "with his feet on the ground," as he put it in his own mind. He walked to Hathaway's hardware store. When he had finished talking to Myra it was late, but there was still a light in the window, and another far in the recesses of the shop. Dave tried the door, found it locked, and knocked.

Hathaway quickly appeared, and he hastened to open the door when he recognized his visitor.

"Come right in, Colby," he said. "You're just the man I want to see." He led the way to the rear, where he was checking invoices. "I called on you today but you weren't home."

"So I heard," said Dave. "I was wondering who it was." More than ever he wondered now, but his curiosity concerned itself with motives rather than identities. Hathaway suspended his labors and cleared the room to sit down on a couple of unopened boxes. He crossed his arms deliberately, and looked at Dave.

"I've been hearing some tall tales about you today, son," he said. "I wasn't able to put you out of mind. Maybe it ain't any of my business—but then most things that happen in Elkhorn can't help being a little of my business. I'm a member of the common council and a business man interested in the town's welfare. Part of the responsibility for Marshal Harkness being here is mine, for instance. I've been listening to some strange stories. I'd like to hear your side of them before reaching any conclusions. That's why I went looking for you today."

There was much reassurance in this calm and practical statement. Dave felt no hesitation, but promptly gave Hathaway a complete account of all that had befallen him since his arrival. The merchant listened gravely.

"It's an old story to me, Colby," he said when Dave had finished. "I've been out in this country a good while and I've seen it all before. It's like growing pains. Many an earnest youngster has wrecked himself trying to buck the combination. There's only one thing I'd like to see you do now—get out of Elkhorn on the first train."

Dave did not answer. His brow was knit in troubled lines.

"Another thing I could not help wondering about," continued Hathaway. "You've been a far luckier youngster than I think you realize. How was it you could unsling a gun against experts and beat them at their own game?"

"I know how to use a gun," admitted Dave. "Maybe I didn't look like I could. But we always had guns around my home. I never used one of them again' a man before but I've known the heft of one since I was a toddler. Before coming out here I practiced with my forty-four for a long time. Months. I practiced fast draws, every kind I could think of, and I made a wooden target the size of a man and threw bullets into it from all sorts of starts and distances. I could outshoot my brothers easily. I never wanted to fight a man, and in fact I never even thought of fighting in connection with my practicing. A gun just seemed to fit naturally into my hand. It was as though I couldn't help learning how to use it."

"Son, I think you learned too well. You've gone and acquired for yourself a reputation that I don't envy. A gunfighter abandons the protection of the community and has to stand alone. Other ambitious killers look on him as fair game. David, I'd still like to see you leave town."

"Leave town?" Dave got up, stirred to restlessness, and gazed into the night through a rear window. "Where'll I

go? I can't go home now. I haven't money enough to travel until there's no likelihood of running into this same sort of trouble. Besides it's too much like being licked for something I didn't do."

"You were lucky twice, boy. Damned lucky! You don't know this town."

"Well, I am learning!" said Dave. He smiled. "I don't think I'll be bothered much after this, Mister Hathaway. They know I can take care of myself, and I'm not likely to go hunting for trouble. I figure the worst is over."

Hathaway shook his head regretfully, knowing there was nothing he could do. He offered no more advice, and they talked for a while of pleasanter things.

Nevertheless, as Hathaway let Dave out the front door he could not resist the impulse to take his hand in a sober and worried grip and exact a parting promise.

"You won't forget what I've said, David, will you? You got a reputation and I don't think you know yet what that means."

"I'll be careful," said Dave. "I'll get right home now and get to bed. I guess I'll be safe there."

"Pray that you will!" said Hathaway earnestly.

DAVE paused for a moment on the doorstep after Hathaway locked up and dimmed the lights within. It was a pleasant, warm evening, and on the air that stirred gently through the town there was the scent of the prairie. In the resorts the night's festivities were just getting into full swing, and there were many men on the street and in the bright doorways. As Dave stepped to the sidewalk someone left a group opposite and came toward him. He moved quickly and there was purpose in his look. Dave did not know him, but he returned the scrutiny. The man halted directly in his path with a blunt question.

"You David Colby?"

Dave's answer was a nod.

"You shot Sam Murfree in the hand last night, didn't you?"

Dave's answer came slowly while he studied the man. The stranger was a slender, wiry, dark-eyed individual and his face was cold and hard. He stood erect and immobile, his hands loose at his sides. He was wearing a dark suit, and below the edge of his coat hung a revolver.

"I shot a gun out of somebody's hand last night," said Dave. "I didn't ask his name."

The man cursed, softly and viciously, his eyes lighting with evil relish.

"So this is the nine-days' wonder! This is the gunslinger that's showin' all Elkhorn where to get off!" He sneered. "You mangy yellow coyote, here's where you're going to learn a lesson." A thumb jerked sideways. "Get off the sidewalk!"

Dave did not move.

"What if I don't?" he asked.

"You know what that means. You're carrying a gun."

"Yes," said Dave, "I'm carrying a gun." He knew that there was no escaping this challenge. The dark-eyed man had taken over another's quarrel and had come forewarned. The horseplay was over; this was in dead earnest.

"I've got a gun," Dave repeated, "and I'm staying right here."

Passersby had halted to look on, or if in line with them, had sidestepped to watch from safer points of vantage. The dark man was silent, his eyes burning. His shoulders drooped slowly like the grim coiling of a snake. Dave's face was pale and expressionless, his eyes unmoving.

"You're staying?" said the man softly. "Well, stay a long time!"

His body jerked as though a spring were loosed. Dave's body pivoted instantly, his hand swung up, brushing the holster, rising with the gun, forefinger drawing the trigger. As the gun exploded his right foot was slightly forward, his body presented sidewise to the flame from the other's gun. The two reports blended like the sound of a stick drawn along a picket fence. Dave snapped the hammer back twice more, emptying three chambers of the cylinder faster than the shots could be counted.

SILENCE returned abruptly, numbingly. Up and down the street there was not a movement. Only the slender, dark-clad man moved, and his actions were slow and even deliberate. He dropped his gun to the sidewalk and pressed both hands to his stomach. He had fired one shot. Three

had ripped into his body. His face suddenly was gray and lined and there was fright in his eyes. He stared at Dave in horrible consternation. He looked around, turned, and walked away along the planks. He walked awkwardly, as though holding himself together with his hands. He went about twenty yards, and then pitched over all of a sudden from the sidewalk into the dust of the street. He remained where he fell.

Every detail of that minute was forever to remain etched on Dave's memory. It seemed for an instant that he had lost control of his body, that he could not move. The street came quickly to life, and men were running toward them. A window in Hathaway's quarters above the store snapped open. A man running by looked at Dave's face and laughed with an iron humor that was beyond his understanding.

Dave's gun hand fell to his side. He did not know what to do next. He had killed a man, and the fact was simply too enormous to assimilate. He looked at the black knot of men gathered about the fallen gunman, moved suddenly as if to join them, and then knew that he could not.

"David! David Colby!" a voice was saying. He turned and saw Hathaway in the open door of the store. The merchant beckoned. Automatically Dave moved. Hathaway seized his arm and drew him quickly inside, closing and locking the door.

"I knew it!" said Hathaway. "By God, I knew it would happen!"

"He made me!" said Dave. "He made me shoot him, before God!"

"Never mind—I'm well aware of that. Tell me exactly how it happened."

Dave told him. Hathaway was unstrung by the killing, as though he had himself brought it about. He took Dave to the rear and up a flight of stairs. They entered a simple room above the store where a lamp glowed on a table covered with a red cloth. In the light Hathaway looked at Dave.

"You're hurt," he said. He drew forward a chair and took Dave's arm. His excitement was already subdued as his practical mind took charge of the situation.

"No, I'm not," said Dave. "I'm all right."

"Sit down here. There's blood on shirt."

Dave sat down, astonished. He felt of his shirt front and found it torn and wet. Hathaway loosed the buttons and drew the shirt aside. Across Dave's chest there was a red wound.

"You were half an inch from death, boy," Hathaway said with grim relief. "That's only a burn. All it needs is a little arnica."

"I turned sideways just in time," said Dave. His move had been instinctive, but it had saved his life. The bullet had just slipped past, taking with it no more than a few inches of skin. Hathaway filled a basin with water and swiftly cleaned the wound. Beyond a slight smarting sensation in the injured area there was no ill effect.

"You stay sitting right there," the merchant commanded as he put away the arnica and hung up the basin on a nail. "I'm going out on the street. I must find out what's happening."

Left alone, Dave surrendered to a strong reaction from the tension of that swift moment of tragedy. Curiously yet characteristically it took the form of resentment and bitterness rather than regret. That man lying in the dust of the street had forced him to take a life whether he would or no. They had trapped him and marked him apart from other men; they had put the brand of the killer unfairly on his brow. The responsibility was chiefly theirs; what part of it devolved upon him David Colby did not fear to face.

"They asked for it, by all that's eternal," he told himself, "and they can have it! I won't quit!"

THERE was an additional reason why he did not want to go, one which he forebore to put in words. If he went now the wan face of that girl in the shack at the edge of town would forever haunt him. There was nothing he could do, but it gave him a sense of comfort to know that no harm had befallen her and that he was within call in case of need.

David Colby, though he did not recognize the fact, was coming swiftly to the fullest stature of manhood. Elkhorn had put him on his own, taught him his strength and given him confidence in it, and it had planted in his soul the seed of responsibility for those weaker than himself.

When Hathaway came up the stairs his face was clouded.

"Boy, it looks bad," he announced. "That fellow was dead when he hit the ground. He's Blacky Bayliss, a gambler and gunman from way back. He hung around Bolson's place. His friends are ranging around now looking for you. Marshal Harkness ain't anywhere in sight."

"Don't they know I'm here?" Dave asked.

"Seems not. You were missed in the excitement. Folks that saw you come in here are keeping their mouths shut."

"Hm!" said Dave, his eyes growing hard. "It's relieving to know that there are folks in this town that ain't panting for my funeral."

"Oh, there are! Plenty. But tonight the others are in the saddle. You'll stay here till morning."

Dave looked at Hathaway. There was a lot of firmness in the merchant that did not show on the surface, he reflected. He smiled.

"No, I don't think I'm staying," he said.

"Nonsense! Do you think I'd let you walk out on that street into the arms of those killers?"

Dave came to his feet.

"I can appreciate that, Mister Hathaway, but I'm going. They may easily learn I'm here, and it wouldn't go well with you if they did. I'm too grateful to drag you into my troubles. I can take care of myself."

They looked at each other silently in a stubborn contest of wills. Finally the merchant surrendered, as he knew he must.

"Boy, don't go out tonight. I'm asking you not to!"

"I've got to go," said Dave. And that was final.

He went out through a rear door into a dark alley behind the row of houses. The alley was empty and very dark. He made his way along it with difficulty, stepping on tin cans and stumbling in wheel ruts, yet he proceeded quietly. Coming to a street, he looked about carefully before crossing and continuing along the next alley.

One block from the hotel the alley came to an end. Since he had such a short distance to travel, and because he had to cross Main Street anyway, Dave took to the lighted thoroughfare. There seemed to be but few people abroad at this end of town; most latefarers were congregated about the larger resorts some blocks removed. He stepped out on the sidewalk and headed for home.

HE HAD traversed only a few yards when from the darkness of the livery yard there came a sharp report and a stab of flame. He flung himself into a doorway, drawing his gun. He was in the recessed entrance to a store, concealed by the shadows. He held his fire, for he hesitated to fling lead into the night without a more definite target. He waited.

There were no more shots, but men were runing on the sidewalk. He risked a glance out and saw three coming from the direction of the resorts. They were closing in; he could not stay here. Setting himself, he sprang forward and sprinted for the hotel.

Immediately two guns went into action. Dave did not pause to retaliate or even to look back. He heard the snap of flying lead about him and only increased his speed. Marshal Harkness was in retirement tonight; the town was wide open. It was a good night for a murder.

Plunging into the hotel, Dave threw himself at the panel where hung a dozen room keys. The porter on watch here at night snapped erect in his tilted chair, eyes blinking, and promptly sprawled on the floor as the chair went over backward.

"Tell anybody that comes here looking for me tonight that I've changed my room," said Dave. "And tell them that I'm staying awake with two loaded guns beside me."

The porter made an unintelligible sound in his throat, staring at the gun in Dave's hand. Dave made for the stairs, taking along half a dozen of the keys. He mounted three steps at a time.

In his own room Dave snatched at his valise and departed immediately. He locked the door after him. In the hall he paused beneath a lamp long enough to examine the numbers on the confiscated keys. There were probably ten rooms on this floor, the second. He would be safer here than on the floor above, with a flat roof over his head on which an enemy could lie and pot him through the window. He moved

along the hall, turned a corner, and found that one of the keys would admit him to a room facing the street. There were others on either side of it. Dave entered.

The room was not in use; there was no light and the window shade was up. He dropped the bag, locked the door, and took a look out the window. Not a soul was in sight, not a sound came to his ears. He watched for a time, then sat on the bed. He opened the bag, drew out another flannel-wrapped gun, cleaned it swiftly, loaded it, and placed it on the counterpane beside him. He sat motionless in the darkness for a time, then rose and pulled the mattress off the bed, covers and all. He stretched it on the floor alongside the bed and threw himself prone. Beneath the door there was a crack of light from the hall. Time passed slowly. The hotel was quiet, with only the occasional sound of a voice or a footstep coming from somewhere. Dave thought with a grim smile of the probable astonishment of the other guests could they but see one of their fellows flat on the floor in the darkness, waiting with two guns at hand. The emergency seemed unreal even to Dave. But those bullets which had pursued him on the street were far from unreal.

How long he waited Dave never knew. It was a matter of hours, for after Elkhorn was for the most part long asleep and the resorts were closing he still lay there watching that crack along the floor.

Chapter IX

An Ordinance is Enforced

DAVE awakened suddenly, filled with nameless alarm. The room was flooded with daylight. He sprang to his feet, his hands closing about the guns on the mattress. A knock was repeated on the door. Dave stepped aside instantly, close to the wall.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"That you, Colby?"

"Who is it, I said?"

"Marshal Harkness. Open up."

For an instant Dave did not move. Then slowly he thrust one gun into the holster and the other down his waist belt. He took a deep breath, turned the key in the lock, and drew open the door. Harkness was alone. He looked within; smiled tolerantly, looking at Dave; and entered, closing the door after him. He was in a different mood this morning, suave and cool.

"Nerves, Colby?" he said with a touch of sarcasm. "You look upset!"

Dave said nothing, watching him. The marshal strolled to the window, glanced indifferently outside, walked to a chair and sat down. He bit off the end of a cigar and touched a match to it.

"You've become a municipal problem, Colby," he said. "I wanted to have a talk with you. I had to knock at half the rooms here before I found you, too. It's about time we understood each other thoroughly."

"Yes?" said Dave. He tossed the mattress on the bed and sat on the edge.

Harkness considered the tip of the cigar a moment, then looked at Dave and shot a question at him.

"What's the game, Colby?"

"Nothing at all. I have no game."

The officer elevated his eyebrows.

"Well, it's possible, I suppose!" he admitted. "What are you in Elkhorn for?"

"A job."

"What kind?"

Dave told him succinctly. Harkness looked unimpressed.

"Yeah, I heard about that already," he said dryly. "Now I haven't been in the neighborhood during any of these scraps you been getting into so I missed seeing you in action. I hear you can use a gun. Where'd you pick that up?"

"What does it matter? Listen to me, Harkness—a lot of you people seem to think that guns were first invented out on the prarie. It's time this town realized different. Lining a straight furrow in a field never put anybody's gun eye out of joint."

"All right!" soothed the marshal. "Suppose you jack the cartridges out of that weapon of yours and show me some of this here expert gun work you been demonstrating." He cocked his head with ironic interest and added, "I have a particular reason."

"What is it?"

"Well, I'll tell you. If an ordinary, average man killed Blacky Bayliss I'd call it murder on the face of it. No ordinary gunman could touch Bayliss in an even fight. You outshot him three

to one. I want to see for myself how it was done."

Dave stood up. He drew the revolver and spun it on a finger, looking at the marshal.

"By the same token I suppose you'd call it murder if Bayliss killed any ordinary, average man who couldn't snake a gun in a hurry, wouldn't you?"

Harkness shrugged. The question was of no interest to him. Dave smiled a wry, understanding smile and jacked the shells from the gun cylinder. Then he replaced it. He talked, explaining something of his methods. Walking across the room he lightly swung his hand and the gun fairly leaped through the air in his grasp, its muzzle menacing the marshal a foot from his unflinching eyes.

Harkness picked up a newspaper from the dreser and handed it to Dave.

"Hold that in your right hand and grab the gun when I say 'Go,'" he instructed.

Dave did as he was bid, again with a smooth, deadly efficiency. Harkness suggested a number of other hypothetical emergencies, and Dave disposed of each problem similarly. There could be no doubt in the marshal's mind—young Colby knew how to handle a gun. Any man can reach for a pistol butt, pull it out and fire; but between two antagonists enjoying equal advantages, the one who can go for his weapon with the precision born of longer and more practical experience will be the one to remain standing when the last echo of the shots has died.

"Good work, Colby!" said Harkness. "Too damn good! You'd be better off if you never saw a gun."

"Thanks!" said Dave.

"I gave you some advice yesterday," Harkness continued, rising. "It still stands."

"Thanks!" Dave repeated, his voice a shade harder.

The marshal gave him a last look over the glowing tip of the cigar, and walked through the door.

Those natives of Elkhorn who observed Dave's appearance on the street that morning did not have to look a second time to discover an alteration in his bearing. Instead of a stranger's curiosity there was the quiet wariness of one who has fitted himself to his new environment. Instead of a youngster's grave deference there was something akin to truculence, the air of exaction forced upon a self-assured man who has been goaded beyond all tolerance.

Dave did not expect to encounter any trouble this early in the day. His assailants last night had acted impulsively; they had not dared to invade the hotel and they probably had cooled off somewhat by morning. Still, Dave took no chances. His first act was to procure a saddled horse from the livery stable. Next he had breakfast. The hour was late for Elkhorn's workaday population, and the restaurant was quiet. One other patron drifted in while Dave was eating. He was a compact, red-faced man with intelligent blue eyes. He watched Dave for a time and then approached, to offer his hand.

"Just for the sake of what's happened the last couple of days!" he said. "I don't care to go into details, but Bolson and Harkness ain't the only two in this town. There'll be folks ready and willing to back you up when the time comes."

"Thanks!" said Dave. "But time for what? I'm not figuring anything more to happen."

"I understand," assured the man. "We needn't talk about it. Just bear it in mind. My name's Bob Converse. I run a saloon down the street. If there's ever anything I can do, let me know."

Dave was somewhat mystified but he asked no questions. He thanked Converse for what he knew to be sincere encouragement and then went out of the restaurant. A little mystery might do the town good. He mounted his pony and rode to the other end of town to call on the little shack which housed the settler's family.

He found the girl very glad to see him. She was standing in the center of the floor miserable and crying when he came upon the shack. At sight of him through the open door she sought to hide signs of her tears and to greet him with a brave smile. He entered and asked her bluntly what was the matter.

"I've got to go," she said. "I should be glad, I suppose. But in spite of all—it's a terrible thing to be ordered out of a town where the father of those children lies in a pauper's grave."

"What's the reason for the order?"

"Because we're vagrants. Likely to become dependents on public charity."

Dave smiled one-sidedly.

"I'm getting to know Elkhorn more every minute. Boot Hill seems to be the only charitable institution the town supports. Who delivered this order?"

She was slow to answer, but he insisted.

"Marshal Harkness," she admitted. "He's been around here several times. He told me to get a job or get going. There's only one kind of job open to me. I have no experience and I have the children to look after. Besides I don't think it would be the best thing for them—for us—after all. I decided to try for home."

"What job is that?"

"In the Golden Hour dance hall."

Dave was shocked. He knew nothing about the girls at the Golden Hour, and a strong, innate chivalry had impelled him to give them only courtesy in his brief encounters with them thus far. But that this girl, pretty, helpless, and gallantly nursing her little brood, should face a job in the resort as the only alternative to starvation was unthinkable. He was angry and his wrath far exceeded any that Elkhorn had yet evoked.

She sensed his emotion and sought to calm it. She smiled at him and her eyes were hopeful.

"We'll get home safe and sound. I can sell most of the things that are left. Father had a lot of tools and a plow and such."

"You'll get mighty little for a plow in this country," he said grimly. "Look here, will you let me do something for you? I know a place you can go until you hear from home or get some money. It's out on the prairie. There's a good sod house and a stable and a corral. It'll be easy to cut some hay for the horses. You'll be better off away from town and I'll keep in touch with you."

She looked at him wonderingly.

"But whose is it?" She laughed shakily. "Our rent here is nothing a year. That's the only kind of place I can take."

"Don't worry a moment! It's empty and abandoned, though it's clean. You'll owe nobody any rent." She hesitated, unable to make the sudden decision. He took complete charge. "Where are the horses and the wagon?" he demanded.

"There's another livery yard right near. I'm paying for their keep with some of the things. But don't you really think——"

"I think I'll set going a little decent kindliness in the town of Elkhorn," he said. "It may shock them to their toes but they'll have to stand it. You pack up your things and I'll get the wagon."

He strode from the shack. The children came running up to see their visitor, offering a shy greeting. Dave grinned at them and invited them to come along. At that moment he actually liked Elkhorn.

THE girl was entranced with the ranch-house at the head of the shallow, verdant valley out on the prairie. She had talked on the way out, telling him of her hopes that her step-father would buy a pleasant bit of land where they all might prosper and she might make a home. She told him of her childhood in Missouri, of her mother's death and her subsequent struggles.

"This is just what I dreamed of!" she said as they entered the valley. And the economical little sod cabin built into the sloping land did not dim her appreciation when they stopped at its door. Dave got right to work moving her things within.

It was a happy hour. They found it easy to get acquainted quite thoroughly in the midst of their activity, and were soon calling each other by first names. Beth, as she suggested he address her, appealed mghtily to Dave; he liked her courage, her quick assumption of understanding friendship, and the fact that it was not necessary to talk to her about the shootings in town. Particularly the last.

When the hour ended Dave rode back to town almost lulled to a feeling of complete security and contentment with all the world.

Chapter X

An Invitation to Die

DAVE ate a quiet and heartily relished supper in Christiansen's restaurant. His appetite had been quickened by the ride over the prairie. As he stood up from the

counter and reached into his pocket to pay for the meal, a man passing behind him set down a foot against the back of Dave's heel. It ground into the soft leather. Dave jerked the foot away, and the other passed on without a word. Money in hand, Dave looked sidewise at the man. The latter gave no sign. He halted at the counter near the door. He was a short, bulky man with a battered face. Slowly he tossed a few coins on the counter.

Dave approached.

"Was that sort of intended for me, mister?" he asked amiably.

The man looked him over, his mouth twisted to one side.

"Intended? Hell, yes!"

"Don't the occasion call for something more?" Dave inquired. "I'm afraid I don't exactly see——" He paused, looking into the unpleasant face. In his open palm a dozen coins rested, forgotten for the moment.

"See what?" demanded the man. "See —what?"

"Well then—*this!*"

The coins scattered in a shower. Before they jingled to the floor the man uttered a startled and unexpected grunt. Dave was standing just a little closer to him, grinding the muzzle of a Colt into the bulky man's stomach. It happened just like that, calmly and so suddenly as to be rather unprecedented.

"I still don't see," said Dave, "so you better explain."

The man had not been grim and wary; he had been completely confident, hence his collapse was also complete. Perspiration beaded his brow. He crawled immediately and ignobly.

"I didn't mean a thing, fella. It was an accident. I was talking too much, I didn't mean anything by it."

Faintly Dave sneered. He reached with his free hand and lifted the other's gun, which he thrust into his own back pocket.

"I won't insist, mister. You mount up about as dangerous as a flea bite. You better run along before you get scratched. You'll find your gun safe in care of Marshal Harkness. Turn around. Get going!"

The man suffered more from the indignity of his departure than from his scare. But he went without argument. Dave returned his gun to the holster, picked up the scattered money, and returned to the counter.

"Man alive!" Christiansen exploded. "I was never in sech a sweat! Holy smokes, that's Bumper Wilson!"

Dave looked blank.

"He was pickin' a fight sure as shootin'," said the restaurateur. "I tell you he's poison. He's no drunk cowboy, he's one of John Bolson's guerillas!"

"Glad to know it," said Dave, grinning. "I'm going down to Bolson's to turn that gun over to Harkness. They'll give it extra care."

The tall man leaned over the counter, looking at Dave.

"Say, kid, are you pulling the wool over somebody's eyes? If I'm too curious you can shut me up—but honest, are you straight from Arkansaw?"

"I sure am."

"Well," the other sighed, "we're finding it harder and harder to believe. You're sure leavin' Arkansaw fast and far behind. I know some been here forty years would never tackle what you just did."

DAVE was a little surprised himself at the incident, now that it was over. He had acted on the spur of the moment—and wisely, it seemed. He had learned to do that. And he had also learned, when astonished, to keep the fact to himself. He smiled without offering any more information.

Bolson's Golden Hour was jammed to the doors. Dave pressed through the crowd, the recipient of several tentative greetings. There are those with the instincts of sycophants who will curry favor with any notable available, no matter which way their sympathies incline.

John Bolson was standing in the portal between the two great rooms. Harkness was with him, watching the dancers. Bolson saw Dave first. He spoke from one side of his mouth sourly, and Silver Tip swung around. They were both looking at him as he approached.

"I picked up something tonight I want to turn over to you, Marshal," said Dave. "You told me folks get hurt carrying them." He held out the captured gun, butt first.

"Whose is it?" Harkness frowned, examining the weapon.

"I'm told he goes by the name of Bumper Wilson."

Harkness' eyes did not leave the revolver. Bolson's lips became thinner. No one spoke for a moment.

"I think Colby don't like our town, Silver Tip," Bolson said in a strained voice. "I doubt he feels at home. I wouldn't blame him in the least if he packed up and left. I have to run along." Without a word to Dave the big man went away.

Harkness looked at Dave, hefting the gun.

"How'd this happen?"

"You better ask Wilson," said Dave.

"I'm beginning to think," said Harkness reflectively, "that you don't take well meaning advice serious enough."

"No?"

"I advised you to leave Elkhorn, Colby. I'm going to repeat that advice again. This time you're going to take it." His mouth hardened, his eyes suddenly were cold. "You're a trouble-breeder, Colby. Elkhorn don't want your kind. You got to get out. I don't want to see you in town after the noon train tomorrow."

There were small red spots on either of Dave's cheeks.

"I'm still looking for what I came here for, Marshal. I'll find it in fair time, I imagine. And until I do I'm sticking."

"I'll come looking for you tomorrow noon, Colby."

"You can't make me leave town, marshal or no marshal," said Dave. "I'm going to be here at noon tomorrow."

For a moment they stood looking at each other. Enmity undisguised was plain between them. Jealous hatred on one side and grim stubbornness on the other. Then Dave turned on his heel and shoved through the press toward the doors.

He went straight to Hathaway's. The merchant was still at work and he smiled a welcome. The smile was a none too successful disguise for a number of questions.

"I got my walking orders tonight," Dave announced. "Marshal Harkness told me to be gone by noon tomorrow."

Hathaway's smile vanished.

"Are you going?"

"No, I'm staying. I just came here to tell you."

"You better go, boy. There's nothing any of us can do, and you know what it means."

"I know. I'm going to walk out of the hotel five minutes after that morning train pulls out. If Harkness is around he'll see me. If you want to, you can be on hand to see what happens."

DAVE'S next stop was at the saloon run by the man who had shaken his hand in the restaurant, Bob Converse. The night bartenders were genially serving a fair sized crowd. Dave sized up the crowd as a gathering of responsible and moderate men. Converse lounged against one end of the bar, a long cigar thrust up from one corner of his mouth. Dave exchanged a greeting with him, and leaned against the bar.

"Harkness has ordered me out of town," he said.

The saloon man's look was alert.

"He did, eh? Goin'?"

"What do you think?"

"Well," Converse said slowly, "if it was me I'd be goin', lock, stock and barrel. You know what it means. I never saw a faster hand with a gun than Silver Tip."

"Yeah?" Dave said dryly. "But I'm not going."

Converse nodded, rolling the cigar in his mouth. He listened while Dave told him about Harkness' visit to the hotel room that morning. And as he listened he frowned.

"You showed him your whole box of tricks?" he demanded.

"More or less."

"You damn fool!" Converse exploded. "Now he knows just what to look for and how to meet it!"

Dave's eyes narrowed.

"Maybe!" he said. "Tell me this. Why is Harkness so dead set again me?"

"Can't you guess? He's jealous. You walk into Elkhorn without a friend or anything to recommend you, and in a day you set the town by its ears. You stole all his thunder. This morning Gid Hathaway corralled a number of fairly responsible citizens who had witnessed the fight last night, and they called on Harkness first thing to set up a case for you on grounds of self-defense. That was just in case. It threw and hogtied any idea Harkness could have of fixing you for murder. It got under his skin. Coupla more things like that and he'd

find himself playing second fiddle in Elkhorn. So out you go, one way or another."

To Dave it sounded scarcely credible.

"Well," explained Converse, "remember that Elkhorn has good ones and bad ones both. Right now Bolson gives the orders and Harkness cracks the whip. You ain't rightly tried yet, but if certain business men were to find an unlickable fightin' man to rally around, the combine of Bolson and Harkness would have a war on their hands. It's jealousy on Silver Tip's part, and plain self-interest on Bolson's. Neither of 'em wants you. It's up to you right now, son, to leave or stick it out if you're able. Tomorrow maybe there'll be a little support for you if you need it—afterwards."

"Well, maybe I will," said Dave. "And then again maybe I won't. But I'm thankful to know it just the same."

Bob Converse thrust out a hard, friendly hand. His eyes were warm.

That night the news spread far and wide in Elkhorn. Dave did his share and more in the spreading. He went from resort to resort, pausing only long enough to chat with the bartenders and deliver the information to their keeping. They would not keep it long, he knew. He wanted the town to know exactly where he stood. There would be no judgment of "unprovoked attack" rendered on the morrow.

The town watched Dave and wondered. Wondered deeply and uneasily. Here was a man and here was an hour of which they had never seen the like. They saw him proceed about his rounds alone, calm, and with that assurance which is always surprising in a diffident young man provoked to action, and they knew that there was not a man among them who, facing a similar problem, would have ventured to linger in Elkhorn through the night.

DAVE lay late in bed next morning. He called the porter in from the hall and had him bring breakfast which he ate propped among the pillows. Afterwards he read a newspaper leisurely, and for a long time did nothing but lie on his back, hands under his head, staring at the ceiling. The hours wore on. At eleven-thirty he rose and began to dress.

He was ready, clad in his clean new clothes, long before the train whistled its coming out on the prairie. He sat by the window, watching the station and the people waiting beside the tracks. He saw no one he recognized. Faces were beginning to emerge from the general mass of the population and assume an individuality in his mind, but this morning the natives were not out to greet the train. Only strangers and transients were there, on business bent.

At seven minutes to twelve the train whistle wailed afar. He observed the time by his silver watch. Swiftly the train advanced on the town, and coasted to a turbulent stop at the station. There was a scurrying of trainmen and passengers, a hasty discharge of boxes and packages, and in a few minutes, with a labored snorting of steam in its huge stack, the locomotive got under way and pulled the train onward to the east.

Dave got up, took his cartridge belt and dangling holster from the dresser and buckled them on. He tossed all his belongings into the valise and snapped the lock. He glanced about the room a last time, then looked at his watch. It was four minutes past twelve.

He opened the door, closed it behind him, and walked down the hall. He descended the stairs and crossed the little lobby to the counter. He bought a cigar there from the proprietor, who licked his lips nervously as he served him. Dave lighted the cigar, broke the match and dropped it, and strode straight through the doors into the street.

CHAPTER XI

THE FLOODGATES OF DEATH SWING OPEN

ELKHORN'S Main Street was oddly empty of life. At least so it seemed, until a second glance revealed the presence of half the town's population in windows and doorways and alleys. They loitered quietly, inconspicuously, to all appearance without a care or an interest in the world. But their eyes betrayed them, for Dave, conscious of them as he stepped into the street, saw every gaze upon him. There was not a woman anywhere among them.

He walked idly in the dusty road, crossing to the other side on a long diagonal. He left a thin trail of cigar smoke after him. His hands were hooked on his belt and his stocky frame was square and erect. His eyes were lazy and watchful.

Down the street a man walked out of a saloon with long, deliberate steps. He headed up toward the station. He was dressed in black and he strode with the grim inevitability of an embodied fate. It was Silver Tip Harkness and he was looking at Dave. In a moment he too stepped from the sidewalk. His hands swung free at his sides. His coat was unbuttoned, but its edges were together, covering the expanse of white shirt front.

Steadily the distance between the two men lessened. Neither gave a sign or attempted speech. Somewhere a window, its prop stick falling out, dropped shut with a bang. The sound emphasized the queer stillness on the town.

Dave kept his eyes on the marshal's face. Well within his vision he could follow the swing of those relaxed white hands and watch the edges of that black coatfront. It was more important that he search in Harkness' face for the flicker of warning that would give him the scant fraction of a second on which the outcome of a duel would depend. Beyond that Dave did nothing. On Harkness rested the responsibility for this; he must be the first to draw, if no alternative to the fight remained.

The two men were now coming together frankly in the middle of the street. Neither slowed or permitted his gaze to flinch. They were one hundred feet apart when someone coughed in the quiet. Harkness stopped. Dave did likewise. The cougher suppressed his nervous impulse, and the sound was not repeated. Harkness resumed his advance.

Harkness had not taken many steps when he suddenly halted again, his coat opened, and his hand was on the gun butt that jutted from his belt.

Dave moved instantly with the precise invisible swiftness of a watch spring uncoiling. His trigger finger was squeezing home while the gun was yet in its holster. The hammer fell as the barrel rose, and as it leveled, a bullet sped straight for that white shirtfront. It was not aimed; it flew by instinct. After that Dave slipped his gun from the holster.

Harkness again started to advance. He had drawn. He made a peculiar move, shifting the gun from one hand to the other. The gun was blazing and a thunder filled the street.

Something barely under a hundred feet is a difficult distance at which to fire a revolver with speed and accuracy. Standing stock still, Dave lined the sight on the marshal. He fired deliberately twice more. Then he held his fire in wonder, and there was a leaden silence on Elkhorn's Main Street.

Harkness stood still with both arms hanging at his sides. His chin was on his chest, and his face was concealed. His knees were bending slowly. A thread of oily smoke climbed the sleeve of his coat from the muzzle of the gun. He had been hit, and he was out of action.

Dave waited tensely, conscious of no injury to himself. He held the gun level, ready to throw it into immediate action. He could, in that moment, have drawn a careful bead and dropped his enemy with a bullet squarely through the heart. He simply waited. A sudden cry broke the silence.

"For God's sake, granger—finish it! Finish it!"

THE voice broke the spell. From a nearby alley a man leaped forth. His gun was out and trained on Dave.

"Don't you move!" he shouted.

"That goes for you too, Bumper!" cried another directly across the street. He had imitated Wilson's move, except that his gun threated Wilson himself.

A supporter of Wilson's darted forth to his aid—and faced a dozen guns instantly drawn across the street. Doors opened smoothly and men began pouring from cover. They halted on the sidewalk with weapons in their hands, uncertain what to do, but grimly determined to prevent the other side from doing anything. Between the lines which in a few seconds faced each other across the width of Main Street, Dave and the marshal stood almost ignored.

Harkness let the gun drop from his hand. He swayed and started to walk to the nearest sidewalk. One of his faction slid his gun into its holster and stepped forward to catch him as he stumbled. Harkness gained the sidewalk, and there slowly lost his last strength. He was laid out on the boards. His head rolled limply to one side.

Dave watched the two lines of men. He dared not move for fear of precipitating a massacre. He recognized both Bob Converse and Gideon Hathaway among those defending him. He recognized other faces opposite. He knew that

there was enmity between them of long standing, and he knew also that it had been well concealed for sheer discretion. Now it stood nakedly revealed in the midday sun. He felt a chill as he thought of what he had wrought, a chill more penetrating than any he felt over the marshal.

Elkhorn was split wide open, and the breach was beyond repair!

Dave put away his gun with a movement that was slow for safety's sake. He caught Hathaway's eye and beckoned. The merchant came from the sidewalk toward him. Each knew that in the event of trouble, the first to fall would be those in the street. They did not flinch.

"Go to the livery stable," David told Hathaway, "and get me a horse. There are things stirring here now which mustn't go further. They will go further certain and sure if I'm in town during the next few hours. Try and settle it peaceable while I go for a ride on the prairie. I have business there."

Hathaway asked no questions. He nodded and walked up the street toward the livery. Dave remained where he stood. A hundred eyes watched them both, ruthless but curious. Dave drew on the cigar as the merchant vanished in the yard, and was still doing so quietly when Hathaway reappeared leading a saddled pony. Dave mounted the animal and paused to survey the crowd.

"Put away the guns," he told them impartially, "and if anyone has anything to say let it wait till later. I'm leaving town for a few hours."

"You coming back?" someone shouted.

Dave looked for the speaker in the ranks of Harkness' supporters, but no one gave a sign. He smiled a thin-lipped smile.

"Yes," he assured the unknown, "I'm coming back!"

He touched spurs sharply to the flanks of the livery pony. It sprang into an immediate gallop. He raced onward and out of town.

Chapter XII

THE FATES DELAY

RIDING out over the rolling prairie, Dave Colby engaged in some very serious thinking during the hour following the duel. It was necessary to decide on a rational plan for the future, to choose the best of the many paths that lay ahead. The crossroads at which he stood was bewildering in its complexity.

Quite definitely he wanted to stay in Elkhorn. Yet there was a bitter truth in the charge Randall Harkness had leveled at him. He was a trouble breeder. He felt no regret about the marshal; between them there had risen something personal. But over the situation he left behind on Main Street Dave felt a deep compunction. Would his presence in town further disrupt the peace? From past indications the answer seemed to affirm so. Dave wished he knew for sure. His own difficulties he could handle, but his mind was uneasy over his possible responsibility, however unwitting, for the dire troubles that might descend on others.

The result of all his thinking was exactly nothing. He must wait and see. Wait and hope. Wait—and look for that opportunity which had brought him to this land and which still evaded him.

There was a new herd arriving on the prairie. Dave first saw the dust of its journey, then the long line of dun cattle in the distance over the rolling terrain. The herders were bringing it to a halt, and throwing it aside to graze. It was a little to the south of his intended course, but he decided to pay a visit before pursuing his "business."

He found the outfit gathered around the cook wagon. The cook, making camp ahead of the others, had a warm meal ready. The men were mostly young, tough bodied, and full of high spirits at prospect of a brief respite from the lonely trail. They waved a welcome to Dave while he was still some distance from camp, and promptly thrust food upon him when he arrived. Their first demand of him was for news from town.

Dave was embarrassed. He knew little news except that of which he was the center of interest. He told them of the killing of the man named Johnson, the fight he had witnessed during his first few minutes in town. And for the moment he needed to tell no more, for he had shocked his hearers.

"Well, I'll be a tongue-tied tarantula!" ejaculated a red-headed youngster with bowed legs and humorous face. "Charley Johnson rode with my father along with one of the first trail outfits. He's been

up and down the country since he could straddle a cayuse and I never heard a word again' him yet. And that murderin' marshal shucked him like an ear of corn! Cripes, I'd like to been in Elkhorn that night!"

"What would you done, Pepper?" asked another.

"Shucked him right back! Damned if I can sit quiet under that news!"

Another voice spoke up, drawling and full of insinuation.

"Can still be done, Pepper! You and all of us. We're ridin' in tonight."

The red-head was instantly taken with the possibility. He looked at Dave penetratingly.

"You any friend to Silver Tip, fella?" he demanded.

Dave shook his head.

"No, I ain't. And I might as well tell you that you won't find him if you go looking in town. He was shot this noon."

Their eyes filled with wonder.

"Silver Tip Harkness shot?" Pepper demanded. "Great guns o' Goshen, who done it?"

"I did," Dave said quietly.

They looked at him, stunned. It was incredible. Then Pepper took his hand and shook it silently, looking into his eyes as though afraid of discovering a hoax. They made him tell how it came about, and listened to his simple, modest account with breathless attention. He would rather not have told them, but they seemed to have personal interest in the matter.

Most of these men knew Harkness by sight, and all by repute. Not in weeks had they heard any news of importance. They were deeply stirred, and the conversation which followed was excited and general. Dave put off their questions and ate his food.

"There's two favors I'd like to ask you fellas," he said when he was finished with his plate. They were instantly granted before being put into words. "First, there's a family of settlers right close by here which is in bad straits. The man was killed in an Elkhorn alley one night. His step-daughter and two youngsters are in a deserted dug-out. Harkness ordered them out of town as vagrants. You can do a real kindness to a young woman fighting plenty trouble if you sort of keep an eye on her place while you're camped here."

"Count on that, fella!" said Pepper earnestly. The appeal was irresistible to their Southern chivalry.

"Second, I'd like to get me a horse. That one's a livery nag. If you could sell me a fair pony from your string——"

"Good as done!" said an older man nearby. "You'll have your pick."

When Dave, leading the livery nag, rode over the prairie to the rolling valley which briefly was Beth Beaufort's domain, he was accompanied by the cowboy called Pepper. From afar they could see her standing in the doorway looking at them. And from afar Beth won the volatile red-head Pepper completely to her cause. Dave told him all he knew of the girl. And he also told him to say nothing of the duel with Harkness.

Young Pepper had certain romantic suspicions which he considered sufficiently well founded to cause him to depart after a brief visit. He went smilingly, promising to drop by with some of the outfit again to inquire how things were going and to offer a hand with any chores.

"Dave, I had a visitor this morning," Beth said soon as they were alone. "You'd never guess what he told me." She seemed both amused and worried by her news.

"A visitor? What did he say?"

"He said this ranch belongs to John Bolson."

Dave did not like this bit of knowledge at all. In an instant the pleasant valley ceased to be a shelter and the cloud that was on Elkhorn fell on this land too.

"This visitor was a drifting cowboy," Beth went on, "just passing by and stopped to pass the time of day. He said he was surprised to see the 'Phantom Ranch' sold again. I told him it wasn't sold, that we'd just moved in temporary, so he told me all about it. It seems that Bolson sells this place at least once a year. Some settler buys it, goes broke, and practically gives it back to Bolson, who only waits to make a cut-throat offer. It's always worked."

"Why do they go broke?" To Dave the land looked too rich to conceive of such an outcome.

"Because the trail is so near. 'Smack up again it,' he told me. 'Bolson usually sells 'em cattle to stock the range, good cattle too, but just about the time the stuff gets acquainted with the country it all ups and dies of fever.' He said Texas

cattle are immune, but they lose their immunity after a season up here and die like the rest."

"Don't anybody warn folks?"

"I asked that too. He laughed and didn't explain why."

"No need," said Dave thoughtfully. "No one would dare buck his game in Elkhorn."

Dave was troubled by the news, though he said nothing of that to the girl. He told her, on the contrary, that it assured her of safe possession for a time since it was owned land rather than public domain. There was logic in this, to be sure—but the presence of John Bolson in the situation clouded the logic.

Late in the afternoon Dave returned to Elkhorn. He had spent a few hours working about the ranch, cleaning the spring, repairing the corral, where the two horses, pasture rather than range bred, were enclosed, examining the walls and roof of the house for damage from the elements. He forgot the strain under which he had lived for days, and took satisfaction in his activity.

Approaching the town, he felt a return of that tension. He was riding into something the nature of which he could not guess beforehand. Since he rode away a situation had worked itself out, one way or another. Now to find out which way—and how it would affect his destiny.

Main Street looked very matter of fact, with the inevitable loungers holding up doorways everywhere and the same lines of patient ponies strung along the sidewalk. Dave walked his horse, proceeding watchfully. He was quickly conscious of being observed, but dispassionately. He could see no sign of hostility or of friendliness in any eye. He quickened the pace a little. Reaching the livery yard he paused only to surrender the hired pony, then rode forth again.

At Bob Converse' saloon he dismounted and tied the reins to the rail. Confidently he walked through the doors. Whatever the signs betided, it could not be immediate ill.

There were several nods of recognition and greeting from the men in the saloon. Converse was presiding at the end of the bar; his eyes lighted but his welcome was subdued. It was only as he looked at Converse that Dave caught the keynote of that hour in Elkhorn. The entire town was subdued. And subdued with an overtone of suspense.

"Just get in?" Converse asked.

"Yeah," said Dave. "Any news?"

"Enough. Little—but enough. Harkness is still alive."

Dave looked at him and said nothing.

"You hit him three times but not once in a vital place," said Converse. "The distance was probably too great. Your first bullet took him in the right arm—remember how he shifted the gun? That may be why you escaped. Shootin' from his left he couldn't touch you. The other two, according to accounts, took him once in the shoulder and once in the thigh. He wasn't knocked down by wounds, he was dropped by shock as though you hit him three times with a club."

"Will he live?"

"That remains to be seen. It ain't known yet, and the doctor won't make a guess. He's in the care of a Mexican couple he lived with, and he gave them orders to keep everybody out—everybody. He lost blood and he's far from being a whole man. The next twelve hours will tell which way the wind blows."

To Dave the news was at once happy and tragically disappointing. He could easily find it in him to be glad that Harkness lived. Yet he knew that his survival left the situation scarcely altered. It would be declared that a lucky fluke had practically disarmed the marshal at the outset, and that Dave's victory proved nothing.

"A deputy marshal has been named by the mayor," Converse went on. "His name is Booth. He don't matter. He was only picked to please both factions in town."

"Did they make peace this morning?"

"Enough for a day or so, I guess. Your going helped some, and then Harkness declined to die. Everybody finally put away his gun and there was a lot of talk and at last we went home to wait and hear what Silver Tip was going to do."

"A lot depends on that, eh?"

"Everything, more or less. There was some talk of getting up a petition," Converse added dryly, "addressed to Harkness' better nature, asking him wouldn't he kindly up and kick off for the good of the community. But it fell through."

Dave looked keenly at Converse.

Lynch talk, eh? Converse smiled grimly, and his gaze did not waver.

Chapter XIII

ARMISTICE

IT WAS about midevening when John Bolson entered the Golden Hour after a prolonged absence. He was preoccupied, and though he smiled as usual and responded cordially to all greetings there was a line of annoyance on his brow. The woman in the red dress had been looking for him, and at her first opportunity, beckoned from the dance hall entrance. He followed her into a booth at one side of the inner room, and sat opposite her at the little table. There were curtains across the entrance to the booth, but they left them pulled back.

"Did you see Harkness?" Myra demanded.

"No," said Bolson. "He won't see anybody. That Mexican woman who keeps house for him threatened me when I tried to get by her. I don't know what's got into him!"

There was contempt in the woman's laugh.

"His vanity is a lot more wounded than his body. That's what's the matter with him. Did this woman give you any message from him or tell you anything more about his condition?"

"She did not. All I can learn is what Doc Peters says and he's not saying much. I think he's scared Harkness will die. So he's making no promises."

"Well, no matter what he does, Harkness is completely out of the running for the present. Three times hit by a tenderfoot who never got a scratch—no wonder he won't see anybody!"

Bolson took out a cigar, tore off the end savagely, and chewed on it.

"That blasted kid! He's ripped up the town worse than if he were forty Lincoln County gunmen."

The woman looked at him closely.

"What do you plan to do about him?"

"Hm!" said Bolson in smouldering fashion. "He'll be taken care of."

"I see," said Myra. She looked away and spoke casually. "So far he's proved a pretty tough one to take care of. Suppose I handle him?"

"You?" Bolson lighted the cigar, studying her. "How?"

"How do you think?" Myra shrugged and smiled faintly. "My way is lots older than yours."

Bolson was not easily persuaded. But Myra talked to him at length, and as he listened the proposal came to have more and more validity. Bolson viewed these tactics with no pleasure, but they promised results. Myra's plan was simply to use her charms upon him, and perhaps thereby to attach him to their interests. She was confident of success. Dave Colby would emerge from their encounter, as so many have since the beginning of time, either an ally or a disarmed enemy. Myra smiled as she revolved the idea in her mind, and Bolson gave her a reluctant but heartfelt grunt of admiration.

She was well equipped for the fray. She wore the red dress like an emblem, and the scarlet of her lips, the white of her skin, and the purplish-blue of her large handsome eyes were the colors of her battle pennants. She had magnificent equipment—and she had something more which she did not explain to Bolson, for he would not have accepted it complacently. She had an eagerness to win and to possess the strong, vital youth of Dave Colby, and to wear it for a trophy as she might flaunt a red rose thrust in her dark hair.

That night Dave met the new marshal, Booth. He ran into him on Main Street, and he recognized the man only by the large nickeled badge on the other's coat lapel. Booth knew Dave, and stopped to look at him. He was a tall, thin man with drooping brown mustaches. He displayed no great pleasure in his office. Dave approached him.

"You're Marshal Booth, ain't you?" he asked.

"Yes," said the officer.

"My name's Dave Colby. You probably know who I am."

"Yes, I know who you are."

"Anything you want to say to me?"

"No, I have nothing to say." Whatever Booth's thoughts, he was not revealing them. Dave decided that Booth intended to quit the job as soon as possible, and meantime to ignore the problems left by his predecessor.

"I just thought I'd ask," said Dave. "Have a drink?"

"Thank you kindly, but let it be some other time. I'm not drinking on the job."

David thought, "And you're not going to be seen drinking publicly with me!"

Aloud he said, "That's perfectly agreeable. Good luck with the job!"

The new marshal thanked him gravely, and they parted. And that was all the law had to say to Dave.

A desire to consolidate his new position in Elkhorn led Dave to adopt a definite program for the evening. It seemed somewhat reckless at first glimpse, But Dave made his decision after mature reflection. He set about making a round of the resorts, taking in the wildest as well as the most sedate. He neither drank nor bought drinks for others, though he did accept a number of cigars which he immediately presented to the bartenders. Everywhere he was received with reserved courtesy. He smiled grimly to himself when the vagrant thought occurred to him that it was with exactly such formal deference that a condemned man was treated on the eve of his execution.

THE most important visit of all was that to Bolson's Golden Hour. So Dave considered it, and so he was able to feel when the woman in red crossed the room immediately on his entry. She took possession of him, and there was promise in her eyes. He surrendered amiably and followed her to a booth in the inner room. He was more than willing to learn what that promise held for him. They ordered drinks, and the woman looked at him steadily, leaning her elbows on the table.

"I have wanted to know you, boy. You said you'd come to see me and you never did."

"I was pretty busy," Dave explained. "You probably know why." He could feel the warmth of her gaze enfolding him disturbingly. His face expressed nothing, but inside him something chilled and resisted that warmth.

"I know," she told him. "You've taken Elkhorn apart and put it together again since you came here. Elkhorn hasn't seen many of your kind. Tell me about your home."

For a time they talked in friendly fashion about Dave's home and about the prairie country. He did not mind, and she was absorbed, prompting him with questions and stimulating him with her undivided interest.

"I'm going to do something for you," she said impulsively. She leaned closer over the table. "Don't ever repeat this, will you, David? It won't go very well for me if you do." When he promised she went on, "I know you have some money. So does John Bolson. He always knows those things. He wasn't deceived a bit by your claim to poverty. And he will probably come to you soon with a proposition. He will try to sell you a ranch he owns not many miles out of town."

"He will," said Dave, smiling noncommittally.

"Don't touch it!" she warned him. "It's a perfectly good ranch but it can't be worked. You'll go broke just as sure as you're born. Others have before you. Bolson always buys it back for a song after he sells it."

"That so?" said Dave. He was interested. "Tell me about it."

Her description of Phantom Ranch merely added a few details to what Dave already knew. He concealed his knowledge. He expressed admiration, grudging but sincere, for Bolson's shrewdness.

"Who did he sell it to last?" he asked.

She hesitated, studying him; then she laughed.

"That's a story in itself. I guess there's no harm telling you. That settler who got himself shot in the alley the other night bought it for cash about an hour before he was killed."

To Dave this news was enormous. He smiled idly.

"He had it coming to him one way or another! Did his family take over the land?"

"No indeed. Bolson got hold of the deed before anybody saw it—and that's that. It's all ready to be sold again to you."

Impulsively Dave offered her his hand.

"I certainly won't forget this favor," he said ardently. "You don't know! I want to thank you very kindly!"

"Call me Myra, David boy," she said, arching her brows and letting her dark lids droop as she looked into his eyes.

"Myra!" said Dave. And he felt his control of the situation slipping when for the first time, as he met her gaze, color began to mount in his cheeks.

However, it was a puzzled and faintly rueful adventuress who reported to Bolson later when he questioned her.

"He's a tough one to handle in more ways than one, John," she said. "I

thought at first he was falling for me hook, line and sinker. I had him telling tales of his childhood and that's usually a sure sign. But he was too polite when he said goodnight to me, way too polite." She smiled abstractedly. "I think he's afraid of me. Just give me a little more time."

Bolson was disappointed and impatient, but he bided his time.

DAVE COLBY found the hours hanging heavy on his hands during the next two days. He made no attempt to find a job, for he knew that his position at present was too insecure for any employer to want him. There were plenty of riders available in Elkhorn, but there was only one Dave Colby.

The town was full of rumors. Harkness lived on, but no one saw him and as a result all sorts of tales were current —that he was dead, and Bolson kept it secret; that he was barely injured and waited only for the proper moment to come forth and slay Colby; that he was badly wounded but grimly clinging to life in order to exact revenge. There were tales about Dave too, but they were vague and unconvincing. He was entirely too much in evidence, quiet, close-mouthed and assured.

Dave and the town had one thing in common. Both waited, knowing well that the chapter had not yet ended. A climax had to come—and that before very long.

Dave Colby was not unusually suspicious by nature, but Elkhorn had taught him wariness, and wariness was his armor against what he recognized to be a subtle and powerful attack. He remembered the story of Samson and Delilah, and knew that Delilah must have been a woman like Myra. It would have been easy to surrender to the spell Myra wove about him. But Dave declined. His vigilance must not relax—and then there was also a reason of which Myra knew nothing. It was that clear-eyed, courageous girl who cheerfully fought adversity alone out on the prairie.

Myra sought to waylay Dave several times, but without success. He danced with her once, bought her a few drinks, but as she volunteered no more information of value he politely excused himself when she would have sat with him alone in a curtained booth. Late in the evening of the second day she threw discretion to the winds and approached him at Bolson's bar. She looked at him with half-closed, smouldering eyes, and her lips quivered faintly with emotion. Dave returned her gaze, stony of face, frankly admitting to himself that he was afraid of her now—and admitting also that he had never looked into the eyes of a handsomer woman than Myra was at that moment.

"You won't talk to me," she said. "And I want you to. Tomorrow I want you to come and see me. John Bolson will be away all day. I'll be upstairs. Come at one o'clock."

"Ma'am, I'm sorry," Dave said, "but ——"

"Don't say another word!" She came very close to him, putting a hand on his arm. "You can come. I want you to come. I'll be waiting." She gave his arm a sudden, fierce squeeze; then turned and half ran, half walked to the dance hall, her head high in the air.

Around Dave several pairs of eyebrows elevated significantly. Dave watched Myra disappear, and his own brows gathered heavily above his eyes. He turned abruptly to the bar, paid for the drink that remained untasted, and left the Golden Hour.

It was half past four when Bolson dismounted before his saloon next afternoon after riding out to see a herd in which he was interested. He left his horse at the rail and entered. There were not many in the place. At the end of the bar stood Myra, a drink before her. Her dark eyes were stormy and her nostrils were thin with suppressed emotion. Bolson came to her with a question in his gaze. He could see that she had been awaiting him.

"I release all claims on that Colby man," she said. "He's either half-witted or not human. I'm through!"

Bolson's shoulders shook slightly in a silent laugh.

"You and Harkness both, eh? He's certainly collecting some exclusive scalps, that kid is!"

Myra turned on him, her face white. But she refrained from speech for a minute until she was more composed.

"Don't talk to me about him! Do something—I don't care what. He'll hang up a third scalp soon if you don't."

"Shall we have him—ah—made a permanent resident?" Bolson found

grim relish in that hoary frontier jest.

"Yes—whatever you want," she answered. Hate was livid in her voice. "Anything! It'll have to be something mighty good to please me as much as I want to be pleased!"

"All right," said Bolson. "If that little matter'll please you I guess we can make you deliriously happy."

His eyes narrowed, and he strolled away with a smile of satisfaction on his large face. He thought that Myra took it a little too much to heart but ascribed that to wounded vanity. His satisfaction would have been considerably dimmed could he have known the depth of that wound. For the first time in her life this woman who gloried in her power had waited an hour and a half on a rendezvous to which the man never came—and the man was Dave Colby.

Chapter XIV

THE PACK GATHERS

DAVE watched the restaurant man Christiansen as he ate at the counter that evening. The tall man was acting very queerly. Several times he looked at Dave penetratingly, and then hastened to resume his task. He did not smile and there was no deep-voiced banter. He served his patrons swiftly, efficiently, and remained aloof in his idle moments.

Dave lingered over his meal. He found himself, after a time, alone at his end of the counter. Christiansen came down the counter, swinging a damp cloth over the board. He spoke to Dave crisply, out of the side of his mouth.

"Lay low tonight. There's talk abroad that Harkness died late this afternoon. I think it's a fake."

"Lay low from what?"

"It's a good excuse to gang you. Something's in the air. That may be it. I'm not fooling—dig in somewhere out of sight and stay there till morning."

"Thanks!" said Dave.

Christiansen tossed the towel at a rack and walked away.

Dave had observed no perceptible change in the attitude of the town toward him during the latter part of that afternoon. But he trusted Christiansen's warning. The man adopted a neutral stand—outwardly. Dave had felt, nevertheless, a sympathy here from the first. If the tall man urged him to lay low, there was no doubt about its advisability.

Emptying his coffee cup, Dave considered ways and means. He could get his horse and ride out to the trail camp near Phantom Ranch. But that advertised fear. Any such course must be out of the question. He would undoubtedly be welcome in the homes of a good many men in Elkhorn tonight—but that would put a friend in jeopardy. Dave decided to go directly to his hotel, and to remain in retirement in his room for the evening. He doubted that any gang would venture an open invasion of the hotel. And if they did they would receive a hot reception.

Paying for the meal, Dave nodded to Christiansen and walked outside. He stood on the porch of the restaurant a moment looking over the street. Everything seemed placid and normal. Thrusting his hands deep in the side pockets of the coat he wore over his riding gear Dave started up toward the hotel.

There were others walking on Main Street. Two men strode behind Dave as he progressed homeward. He was aware of them suddenly, and was puzzled that he had not observed their proximity when he stepped off the porch. He increased his pace.

Three men lounged in front of the shoemaker's shop. They came lazily erect as he neared. Dave slowed as they moved across the sidewalk. They did not look at him until they were strung to the curb, barring his passage. Then he saw that though their faces were mild, their eyes were cold and hard as flint. He headed so as to pass between two of them, and they promptly closed together silently and forced him to a halt.

"Well?" Dave said. "What's on your minds?"

"You, fella. We were waiting for you."

"Yeah? What for?"

"You're coming with us."

"Oh, I am, eh?" Dave grinned, his lips thin. "It may be disappointing but I have other plans. Get out of my way!"

They did not move. Dave waited a moment, looking from one to the other. Then his right hand came from his coat pocket like a whiplash. The movement it began was but half completed when his ear telegraphed a warning that came from behind. He spun sideways—but

too late. The two men who had been following him were upon him, closing in with a rush that almost knocked him off his feet. They clamped his hands to his sides, and jerked the gun on his hip from its holster.

Dave submitted without a struggle. They had tricked him and disarmed him in a flash, and resistance was useless. He licked his lips and looked at their faces, waiting. They expressed no emotion beyond a cold satisfaction.

"Come along," said the tall one who had first addressed him. "And come quietly." He led the way directly into the alley alongside the shoemaker's shop.

Keeping a firm grip on Dave's sleeves his two captors shoved Dave into the alley and through to the next street. It was twilight and Elkhorn was lingering at table. Lights gleamed in the windows of every house, and the savory odors of cooking were in the still air. No one was abroad to witness that grim silent parade along the dusty back street. Without trouble or fuss they were carrying out what was obviously a deliberate and careful program.

Of one thing only about that plan could Dave feel assured. It would result in his finish in Elkhorn. Perhaps his finish anywhere. By moonrise he would be dead or maimed. He turned over in his mind as he walked the gruesome possibilities of the occasion, and strangely he smiled. The tall man noticed it.

"You'll laugh out the other side of your face in a very little while, fella!" he assured Dave. One of the others grunted corroboration.

DAVE looked at the tall man with speculation in his eyes. Then abruptly he halted in his tracks.

"Hold on a minute!" he said. He faced the leader, who spun about instantly and warily. Without noticing his captors, Dave shook his wrists free from their grasp with a sudden jerk, and placed his hands on his hips. "Before we go any further I'd like to hear a little more about this party," he said. "Suppose you explain."

The tall man was tempted to visit upon Dave some of the evil which now rose on his face. He restrained himself.

"You maggot!" he said. "You'll find out quicker than you'll like. Don't try balking or it starts right here."

"I don't mind," said Dave. "Let's get it over with."

The leader hesitated, his mouth twisting to one side. He was not averse to humbling Colby. He reached for his gun.

Dave stepped forward, knocked the weapon to the side with his left hand, and drew from within his coat the second gun which had been hanging out of sight in the shoulder holster. He jammed it into the tall man's soft middle. It was all done in one swift motion.

"If you crave to live a little longer keep very still!" he ordered. To the others he snapped, "Step back! Move! Pick up your feet!"

They stepped back. One look at the tall man's gaunt face told them that there was no choice of action right at that moment. They were like hounds on a leash, impotent and filled with a mad, silent fury.

"You hard ones might be dangerous if you weren't so all-fired careless," Dave observed with keenly enjoyed contempt. "When I'm invited places I require the reception to be complete in every detail. Now tell me what was on your minds. I'm curious and I want to know in a hurry."

"Marshal Harkness kicked off today," said the tall man stiffly.

"Yes? Go on!"

"That ought to be plenty. You're under arrest."

"What's your authority?"

"We're deputy marshals in performance of duty."

"The music is good but the words are terrible," said Dave. "You better think up another one." He reached down casually and took from the tall man's grasp the gun he held useless at his side. Then Dave began to back away.

The leader's eyes moved, and his nostrils quivered. Dave shot a glance to the two men on his right. They were frozen in their tracks. Dave instantly ducked, throwing his body about to face the other two. One of the latter had his gun already out. Dave gave him both guns. The double explosion of the two guns in his hands was stunning in the evening stillness. The man was dead before he hit the ground.

Instantly the other three went into

action. The tall leader, lacking a weapon, crouched and shouted imploring curses at his men. Dave turned his fire on the fallen man's companion, placed a bullet squarely at the base of his throat, and then leaped at the pair opposite, colliding heavily with them and knocking their guns aside. While they held their fire for fear of shooting each other and sought to brain him with their guns Dave got set and darted from them in a sudden sprint. He headed for the nearest house. As he reached the corner of the dwelling the guns cut loose behind him. A window in the house shattered and tinkled to fragments. Once around the corner Dave halted and faced the three from the cover it afforded. He sent two swift shots at them, and they scattered. Dave did not wait to give prolonged battle. He set out at a run between the buildings for Main Street.

Dave expected to find the thoroughfare crowded with men aroused by the firing. Instead he found it empty, and he caught sight of a number of men just making a hasty retreat into sheltering doorways. Instantly he sensed that there was no help for him in Elkhorn at this particular juncture. He could understand why. A few days of sober reflection after that flaming emergency when the factions faced each other with drawn guns gave the townsmen cause to hesitate before precipitating war.

"Elkhorn is nursing a real bad case of nerves," Dave reflected, "and I can't say I blame them. Right now that leaves it up to me entire!"

AS HE paused in the gathering shadows at the head of an alleyway there came from somewhere nearby the unmistakable crack of a rifle. There was a tearing thud, and instantly a long, quivering sliver of wood upended in the wall beside him. Dave had missed the flash and could not guess where the shot came from. He darted across the street where he would most likely be out of line of fire.

From a saloon door almost opposite Dave's new position came the bark of a handgun. Somewhere out of sight a man was shouting. Dave guessed it to be the tall leader of the gang. A short distance up the street a pair of men emerged from a door and broke into a run toward Dave. He looked at them, failed to recognize them, and began running on his own account. He sprinted desperately for the livery stable.

The hostler was cowering in the harness room, terrified by the shooting and by Dave's presence. Dave waited not for his ministrations. He went to the stall where his new mount was kept, released him, and in a minute was saddled and ready. He mounted inside the stable door, and then gave the animal the spurs. The pony shot into the yard and went through the gate at a tearing run. In the street he threw himself into a frantic gallop, eyes wide and nostrils flaring. Dave bent forward over his neck, one hand gripping the reins, the other holding a gun.

There were a number of men on the street now. A couple stepped from the sidewalk in his path. Dave had no need to question their intentions. He fired at them, trusting to luck that the bullets might have some effect. Then he was past them, and the road was clear. He spoke into the pony's ear between set teeth, urging it to do its utmost. He knew there would be pursuit, for there was nothing casual or impromptu about today's effort to get him. The truce had ended, and open war was declared on him in Elkhorn.

Dave's mount was a wiry little cow pony, with a heart full of courage and stamina. It raced out over the prairie as though it understood the emergency and would give its very life for its new owner. They were well away from town when Dave looked back and saw the first of the pursuing party speeding out into the open. In the gathering obscurity he could not make out their number. He passed over a rise in the land and lost sight of them.

The long twilight was swiftly coming to an end. Soon blackest night would be over the prairie. Later the moon would rise, but Dave hoped before its pallid light deprived him of the sheltering dark that he would be among the men of the trail outfit near Phantom Ranch. He did not hesitate to call on them for support, for he knew it would be ungrudgingly given.

Dave gave his pony its head for the way was becoming too obscure. Had he not seen that cavalcade pouring from

town he might have believed himself safe; he could not see anything more of them, and the hoofs of his own mount drowned out any sound. He spoke encouragingly again to the animal, and thrust his gun into his belt.

And then suddenly and stunningly he was pitched headlong out of the saddle over the pony's head. He landed violently on the ground, and rolled over with the breath fairly knocked out of him. He was clear of the horse, which was threshing about on its back close by. Dave sprang up and ran to the animal. It came to its feet just as he seized the bridle reins.

DAVE needed no daylight to learn what had happened. The horse had stepped into a hole, doubtless an old badger hole, and lost its footing. It stood trembling and breathing hard with one hoof raised from the ground. Dave felt of the injured member. Nothing was broken, but the animal was ruined for any immediate use.

Dave led the horse off the trail. He could now hear the pounding of the horses in pursuit. There was still sufficient daylight to betray him to vigilant eyes if he remained in the open. He was in a wide hollow and there was no sign of cover anywhere. He hastened toward the south.

There was a sudden increase in the sound of racing hoofs, and immediately a yell of satisfaction. The cavalcade was over the crest of the low ridge lying to the east, and the foremost rider spotted Dave instantly. They changed their course and headed straight for him.

Dave halted and drew his guns. He stood behind the horse and waited. There was nowhere to run, nothing to do but make this as unpleasant an encounter as he possibly could before they overwhelmed him. In the obscurity he had one small advantage—he formed a dim target, while they by their numbers were much more vulnerable. He smiled a crooked, bitter smile, and decided that Elkhorn would not quickly forget Dave Colby.

The onrushing line of riders could read Dave's intent in his attitude of quiet waiting, and it swerved to reconnoiter before closing in, sweeping around to westward. Dave turned slowly, watching them. And quite by accident his eye caught something peculiar on the western ridge of the gentle valley. Against the faint afterglow of the dying day he saw a man's head. It moved and he saw also a pair of shoulders. Presently the man, seated on a horse, came over the top of the rise and halted to observe the scene below. Others came after him, walking their horses, unhurried and filled with curiosity.

Dave let out a sudden battle whoop of joyous relief, and he elevated a gun straight in the air and pulled the trigger three times. There was a second of indecision on the ridge, and then an answering cry floated eerily over the valley and three spearpoints of red flame blossomed suddenly in the night. The newcomers came down the slope at a headlong gallop, and before them came the shrill, bloodcurdling sound of the Rebel yell. The excited yelp of Pepper rose above the rest. The gang from town turned tail and raced madly from the valley.

CHAPTER XV

STEALTH!

DAVE COLBY was presently the object of congratulations so sincere as to be almost violent. The trail outfit camped near Phantom Ranch was represented by practically its entire personnel. They crowded around Dave asking questions, demanding all details of his trouble and deluging him with offers of immediate and personal aid in wiping out the offending citizenry of Elkhorn. He laughed, expressing heartfelt appreciation of their timely arrival and assistance, and his laugh was not altogether steady. The relief from those tense moments while he stood watching the gang charge into the valley left him more than a little shaken. It was too unexpected, too good to be realized all at once.

For reasons which were sufficient if none too clear a goodly number of men would sleep between blankets tonight who might otherwise have grown cold and stiff among the bunch grass on the prairie. The gang from town outnumbered the trail outfit twelve to seven, but at sight of that wild band of Texans tearing down the slope they had incontinently fled. They paused neither for

argument nor reflection. It was this which dismissed for good any apprehension in Dave's mind that they were duly authorized officers of the law in Elkhorn. They had seized upon the story to overawe him in a tight moment, but they did not dare confront others with it.

"You come on in with us, kid," Pepper told him, "and we all will clean up Elkhorn till it shines fit to dazzle the survivors in the morning sun!"

"No, thanks!" said Dave. "Elkhorn must cure its own troubles, and there are men in town more than willing to do it if they're organized. Besides my pony's busted and can't carry."

Pepper examined the horse swiftly and expertly.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. What you want to do—I'll carry you double and see you safe home or anywhere?"

Dave reflected, looking at the red-head while the others waited for his answer.

"Pepper, I come this far and I kind of hate to turn back. You could do me a mighty big favor if you'd carry me to your camp, lend me a horse and pay a little social call with me."

Pepper grinned, and a smile broke on the faces of the others. They had all made it their business to drop by at Phantom Ranch and they understood.

"You bet!" declared Pepper. "You all go on along," he bade his companions, "and I'll join you later. Only remember this—I won't never speak again to a one of you if you let the fighting start before I get there!"

"Don't hurry!" advised a dry voice. "Judging by the way those rannies headed for home there won't be hide nor hair of them in sight by the time we hit town."

"They'll be there," said Dave. "But I doubt that you'll meet them. They won't know you. I got a hunch they took you for a war party of Comanches when you came busting down out of nowhere."

"They would've kept that idea," assured the other, "if we'd mixed with them just a mite! Well, good luck! We'll be in town if you need us."

They mounted and continued on their way, leaving the red-head behind to assist Dave.

Travel back to camp was slow, favoring the limping pony and the sound horse which objected only perfunctorily to carrying double. On the way Dave asked a few thoughtful questions.

"What happens to a pony that gets hurt on the trail, Pepper?"

"Usually he gets turned loose to drift, unless he can manage to follow. If he's a right valuable pony sometimes it's possible to board him with a nester along the trail, or even to sell him to somebody willing to nurse him back to usefulness."

"What happens to your cows that go bad?"

"Same thing, only it ain't so easy to sell them. Nobody wants to buy, hoping to pick up gaunted stuff free. Generally they are herded with the others till they drop."

"I see. About how many do you lose on the way?"

"Well, that all depends on the season. This has been a kindly one. Last year there was seven weeks of drought and this summer the trail is littered with bones. A trail boss has to figure on an average loss of three per cent. We'll be shy about a hundred head when we turn over the herd."

"Can such stock be nursed back to health too?"

"Sure—if it can rest and find forage and water. A month or two or that would save nine out of ten that dies on the trail. It ain't worth nobody's while."

"I see," Dave repeated. He was revolving an idea very carefully in his mind.

They paused at the camp only long enough to tell their story and then rode forth again, this time on two sound horses.

BETH BEAUFORT was prepared for their coming by a long, distance-piercing cry of Pepper's which floated clearly to the cabin long before they dismounted at the door. She was radiant at sight of them. These had been exciting days, and the kindly attentions of the Texans had calmed her fears and given her hope again. A queer little smile quivered on her mouth and there was a touch of red on each cheek as she gave Dave her hand and invited them both inside the cabin. The children were awake and staring with wide eyes from the bunk, thrilled to have visitors.

Pepper did not stay long. He had tried to argue Dave out of his purpose to return to Elkhorn alone, but without avail. He forced them to surrender unconditionally to his irrepressible brand of cheerful idiocy, and then made his farewells. With a stern look he exacted from Dave a promise that they would meet again soon.

When they were alone a certain constraint fell on Beth and Dave. The girl looked at him across the table.

"David, those men told me some things you never said a word about. Why didn't you tell me?"

"About what?" asked Dave with inward consternation.

"About all the fighting you've had to face in Elkhorn. About Harkness."

"Why—I just didn't want to worry you, Beth. I could take care of myself all right."

"I'll bet you got into all that trouble on account of me!" the girl asserted.

"I didn't!" Dave denied. "It happened for no reason at all. Like most of the trouble in Elkhorn.

She studied him. Then she smiled, shaking her head slowly.

"It's done now so I can't say anything. It felt awfully good to know that I wasn't entirely alone in this country when trouble came. But I don't want it to happen again. My brother has received my letter by now and there should be word from him any day. If anything starts again you must promise not to fight over it. I can start for home any time—those men brought me a lot of provisions and——"

"Wait, Beth! I want you to promise something. Don't leave this ranch until I know about it. If you are threatened, go to the trail camp. They'll see that you are allowed to stay here."

"But why? Bolson may sell it any day."

"I don't think he will. In fact I know he won't. It's all very mixed-up and hard to explain, but I'm asking you to trust me and stick here a while longer. Will you?"

Beth gave a troubled promise. Dave was too earnest to be denied. He told her a lie that disturbed not even the surface of his conscience, and assured her that his unexplained plans involved no visible trouble. It was a white lie. The trouble that grimly and unavoidably lay ahead had passed far beyond his or her responsibility.

They stood outside for a time before he made his departure. The moon had come up over the horizon, and the prairie was soft and lovely under its magic. Her eyes shone as she looked at him. He retained for some time the hand she gave him in farewell, and there was something bated and breathless in the night. He rode away in the moonlight with a singing in his heart. Life was young and life was good—even with Elkhorn before him.

THERE was a rear entrance to the livery yard, Dave had learned, and he made a circuitous approach around the town and through back alleys. He reached the yard unobserved by anyone in town. The enclosure was empty, and the stable looked deserted. Dave found the hostler asleep in the harness room on a tilted chair. After putting the horse in a stall Dave roused him.

"Listen, you!" Dave said, shaking the man. "I'm staying here tonight. I'll be up in the hayloft, so don't get worried if you hear me stirring around. I'm laying low until morning."

"Yes, sir!" said the hostler. He viewed Dave as though he were an apparition.

"Any news break in the last few hours?"

"Not much. There was mighty near a gunfight at the Golden Hour. A young Texan from a trail outfit and a fella named Carson had a right hot argument."

"What's the Texan's name?" Dave shot at the old-timer. "Did anything happen?"

"No, though it wasn't the Texan's fault. I dunno his name. Bolson jest stepped into it in time to stop a general massacree. He gentled that outfit, and a good thing he did—they was loaded for bear! They hung around and then went home disgusted.

The news was second hand and the hostler had no more details.

"Is Marshal Harkness actually dead?" Dave demanded.

A cunning look came over the old fellow.

"They's a story around that he is, but I know better. The Mexican told me. He's sitting up and mending fast."

Dave reflected a moment, then walked from the room without further questions. He mounted to the deep, fragrant hay pile in the loft, and sat there for a long time thinking. After a while he stretched out and went quickly to sleep.

Sometime in the night Dave awakened suddenly. He did not move. A low voice was calling him.

"Mister Colby! Are you awake, Mister Colby?" It was the hostler.

"What do you want?"

"There's somebody here wants to see you."

"Who is it?"

"It's a—a lady!"

Dave frowned, wondering. Carefully he moved in the hay to the ladder. For a moment he considered what action to follow. There was no use refusing to descend, for his hiding place was now known. He wondered how that had come about. Making up his mind he passed below.

MYRA stood in the harness room, a shawl about her shoulders. There was a white flower in her dark hair, and her eyes were bright in the yellow lamplight. Dave approached her with wariness in his gaze.

"Well?" he said.

She smiled, and her eloquent brows moved ruefully.

"I've found you," she said. "It wasn't very safe to look for you, but I had to try. I told Jimmy today to come tell me if you turned up here at all tonight."

"Yes? I can well imagine it ain't safe."

"Why didn't you come to me yesterday?" Inexperienced as Dave was with women he could sense the humiliation in the question and something of what it meant to a woman of her arrogant pride.

"I'm truly sorry, ma'am," he told her quietly. "I thought it over and considering everything decided I couldn't."

She nodded briefly as though anticipating the answer. Then her lips grew small and her eyes shrewd.

"You know you're due to die first time you're sighted in Elkhorn?" she asked.

"No, I didn't know," he said, smiling. "I did guess that there seems to be some such opinion around. It happens to be mistaken."

"You're sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"I reckon so."

"The saddest thing about your kind," she observed, "is that by the time you learn better it's too late. You can't last twenty-four hours within ten miles of this town. They're hunting for you now. They'll find you, and I know that they expect to shoot you on sight this time. You can't fight a mob. And there's a mob on your trail."

"It's their fight!"

"Listen to me, David!" She came near and placed a hand on his arm. "I found you because I can save you. There are ways of calling off the whole pack. I can do it. You can walk down the street by my side this minute and no one will touch you. Come with me and everything will be all right. Stay with me and I can promise that they'll be—better than all right!"

He removed her hand from his arm.

"Myra, you're with Bolson's crowd. I'm not and never can be—for good reasons."

"To hell with Bolson!" she said passionately. She threw discretion to the winds in her impetuous desire. "I don't care about him. You make him a proposition same as Harkness did and you can run the town. He'll be afraid of you, and if you take care of me he'll be afraid of me too. David—you fool, I'm offering you myself and everything in Elkhorn on a golden platter! Do you prefer to be killed?"

"No. And I won't be. If I became another Silver Tip I sure would be knocked over before very long, just as he was. I'm sorry, but the answer is no—and it is going to stay that way!"

She drew back from him. Her dark eyes gazed at him as piercingly as twin blades. Abruptly she drew the shawl closer about her and walked from the room without another word.

Dave Colby was deeply disturbed by this encounter. Fighting a woman was infinitely harder than fighting a man, he decided. A bullet ended a battle with a man, but conflict with a woman continued as long as it pleased her to fight.

He returned to his nest in the hay, wide awake. For a long time sleep evaded him. Somewhere a rooster crowed just as he dozed off a second time. A horse stirred nervously below. Dave moved uneasily in his sleep.

Chapter XVI

CORNERED

DAVE'S next awakening was a violent plunge from the soft billows of unconsciousness into a pit of nameelss fear. He lay in the hay without moving a muscle, his heart pounding, his brain casting about desperately to find the reason for his dread. The town was silent; in the stable he heard only the breathing of the animals. Yet there was a presence in the darkness that Dave could almost feel.

An instant later he knew what it was. There were men in the stable. They had come in stealth. Their arrival could only mean that Dave's retreat was known, and that they had come for him.

From where he rested Dave could not see below. A faint glow seeped up from the lamp which burned all night. The hay loft was filled with shadows and faint outlines of baled hay and rafters.

Moving so that no rustle betrayed him Dave drew a cartridge from his belt. He flung the weighty pellet so that it sailed across the floor and fell into the stable below. It clattered against a post, bounced off a wall, and then a horse snorted indignantly and moved with a sound of shod hoofs on a hollow floor.

The disturbance was sufficient cover for Dave's next move. He crossed through the hay to the corner where upended bales were poised over the opening above the stable. He listened. Quiet had returned, but a voice was whispering. Dave braced himself, shoved experimentally, and then gave a mighty heave to a bale of hay. It rose on edge, poised a second, and plunged over into the yawning space. It landed below with a sodden thump and caused instant confusion. A human voice cried out, and every horse in the place awakened in fright. The stable was filled with movement.

Dave again darted across the loft. He groped till he found the big square window which opened above the street and through which the baled hay was received, raised on a beam outside with block and fall.

In the stable a quick voice spoke, cold and implacable.

"David Colby! Will you surrender peaceable?"

Dave drew his gun and answered with a shot. Then he drew open the hay window.

There was a man standing almost directly beneath. He stood with his back to the street, looking into the yard. His hand rested on his holstered gun. He was obviously a lookout on guard.

Dave knew he could not remain where he was, nor could he retreat. He smiled, taking a tight grip on his gun, and then sprang forward into space. He sailed through the air and landed feet first on the shoulders of the guard, swinging the gun barrel as he came. The man went down like a poled ox, breaking Dave's fall. Dave rolled over easily and came immediately to his feet, to return to the guard. The fellow never knew what hit him; he was unconscious and his scalp was bleeding. Dave rolled him off the sidewalk into the gutter and left him there.

Within the stable there was shooting, aimless and furious. The horses were stamping kicking in terror. Dave could hear voices calling his name. He stood before the gateway to the yard, staring within. Shadows were leaping and dancing in the tiny circle of radiance cast through the doorway of the stable by the lamp.

Dave entered the yard, running swiftly. He approached the door from one side and looked within. He could see them, half a dozen in number, in positions which commanded the hay loft, yet which afforded cover from any fire from above. Bumper Wilson was present, and Dave recognized the faces of the others though he did not know them by name. They had no inkling of his escape, and they delayed only to devise the most practical plan for dislodging him from above.

Then Dave saw the blanched face of the old hostler regarding him from just within the stable door. His jaw was slack and his eyes popped from his head.

Dave's gun came out smoothly and his free hand beckoned to the hostler. The old fellow was too frozen to respond instantly, but the menace of the gun aroused him. He edged from the stable, and no one observed his departure. Dave seized his arm, and ran him in a circle around the yard, avoiding the

light, to the rear gate. He halted in the darkness of the alley.

"What happened?" he demanded, his grip on the other's arm tightening.

"I dunno!" the hostler protested. Fear rode him mercilessly. "Honest to gosh I dunno! I was asleep on my cot in the harness room and they stuck a gun in my face to wake me. They came for you. I thought you were a goner sure."

"Not yet awhile!" Dave told him with grim relish. He studied the old fellow in the waning moonlight, convinced of the truth of the tale. It was Myra then who, scorned, had sent these assassins. "Now I'll tell you what you're going to do!" Dave continued. "For an hour or so you'll disappear. I don't especially care where or what explanation you give. Say I grew wings and kidnapped you. But later on I want you to find those fellows and give them a message. I saw them and I'll know them next time I see them. Tell them tomorrow I'm going hunting. The law seems to have gone by the board in Elkhorn, and it's every man for himself. Tell them to look out for themselves real careful. I'm going to hunt for them one by one —and I'm shooting on sight."

"Mister Colby, you can't buck that outfit," pleaded the old man. "They'd get you for murder if you did anything like that!"

"Oh, no they won't!" assured Dave. He laughed. It was a laugh of sheer pleasure, but it was not a pleasant laugh to hear. "Those fellows have fixed things for me so that no jury in the land would return a verdict again' me. They are looking for me—presumably they will be looking for me tomorrow. If I meet and shoot them it will be in self-defense. Explain that to them if you like."

"Not me!"

"People have said unpleasant things about Elkhorn because it's too warlike," Dave added. "I'm going to prove that a mistake. There's been entirely too much peace in this town. Sometime after sunrise in the morning Elkhorn's going to learn what real war means. Now you do what I tell you, and I'll be around to thank you. If not—well, I'll be around anyway!"

The old hostler said nothing. Dave released his grip on the other's thin arm, and set out down the alley at a run. At his back a faint glow of impending day was beginning to spread over the eastern sky.

Next issue David Colby sorts wildcats in a cyclone—an', boy, he sorts 'em!

IT'S IN THE NEXT WEST

"Lead Language"

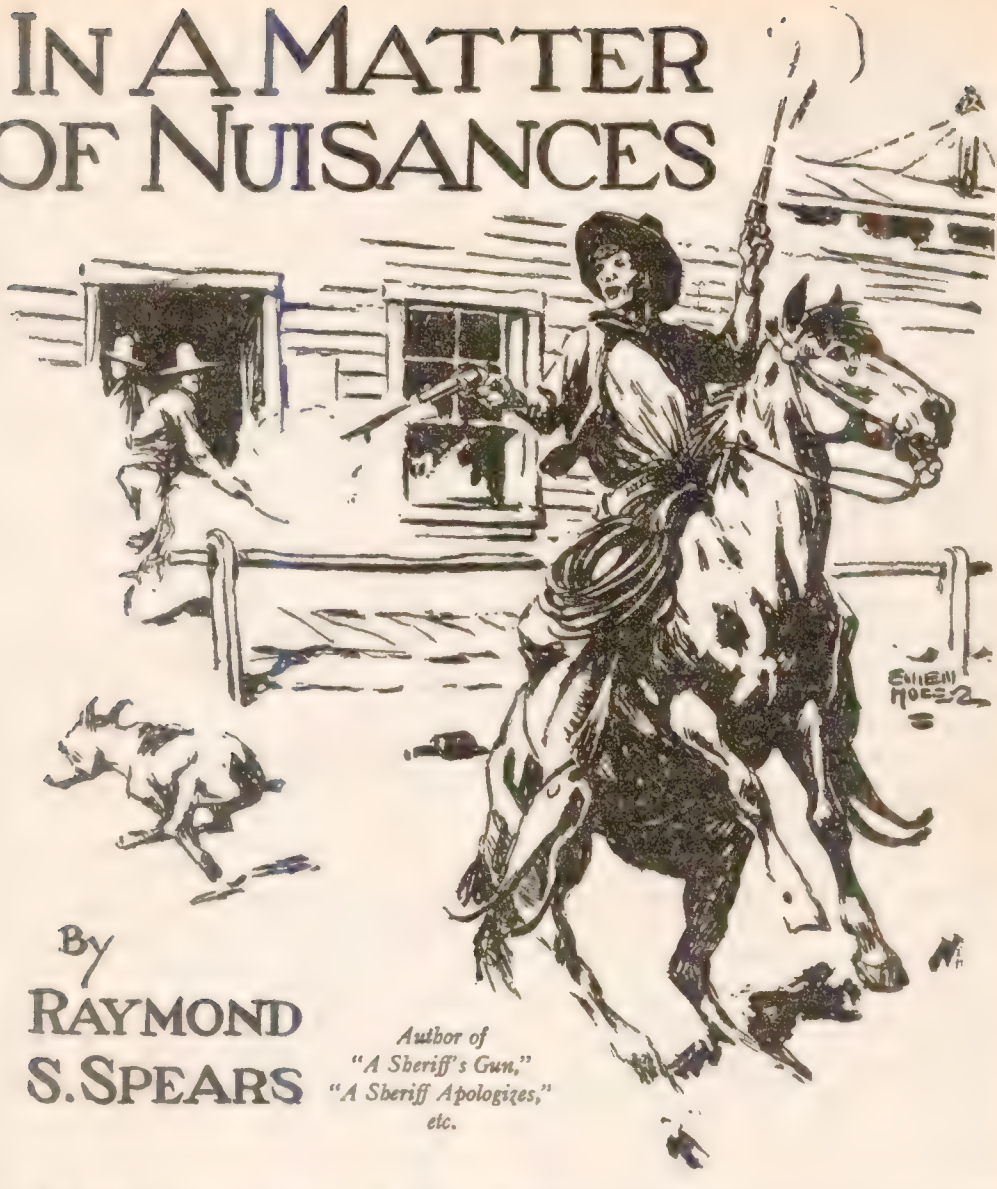
the great serial

by

W. C. TUTTLE

Sad Sontag and Swede Harrigan

IN A MATTER OF NUISANCES



By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

Author of "A Sheriff's Gun," "A Sheriff Apologizes," etc.

Sheriff Bill Ludden sets a nuisance to catch a nuisance and gets results *a-plenty!*

OF COURSE Croup Kadem had to break out bad right in the middle of Court Week. It was always that way with that trouble maker. Whenever Sheriff Bill Ludden was as busy as he could be with official, clerical or other duties, this dadblasted Kadem would ride into Tipping Rock and helletty larrup all over the place. And the honest, and voting, storekeepers of the outlying town never knew how to handle him as a customer.

Kadem was bad. He lived over in Praying Canyon where everyone else had starved out or died of violence. But Sheriff Bill Ludden knew as well as he knew his own name that Kadem was yellow through and through. The fellow was just a boastful, loud-mouthed, troublesome bag of hot air, who would only terrorize a town like Tipping Rock where most of the people were peaceful and went unarmed.

"Say, Sher'f!" Putt Purcell, storekeeper of Tipping Rock, called on the telephone. "Croup's come in barking and shooting worse'n eveh. Cain't you do something with that man before he kills somebody?"

"Well, I reckon," Ludden sighed.

"Well, *do it,* then!"

Putt hung up. Putt was one of Ludden's best friends and supporters over at Tipping Rock. He owned the Gen-

eral Store, and his being provoked was a bad sign. Croup was not only after gamblers, saloon keepers, rough business outfits, but he was bothering the reputables.

Ludden had been after Kadem before, and personally could handle him so that Kadem would cool down and behave himself. By leaving his official business and riding all night, Ludden could catch Kadem sleeping off whatever he had been drinking, but a fine of $100 or a month or two in jail for disorderly conduct was all any justice could legally assess the fellow who had bothered the happiness of five or six sheriffs, never with any terrible violent trouble; and yet always that exasperating, impudent, spiteful and inopportune messing around would break out just when the sheriff's department had all it could attend to, conveniently, somewhere else.

Sheriff Ludden was provoked. He had to leave his office in the midle of planning a campaign against a gang of rustlers who were slipping away with several head of cattle a day. He went over to the sidewalk and started strolling around the Court-House Square, looking through the crowd gathered there for an inspiration. Once and for all time Croup Kadem needed handling —handling right. And sure enough, there loafing near the court-house was Dud Pilarn.

Now Dud Pilarn was nearly six feet tall, slim, dandy and lippy as they make them. He had killed two men and come clear and had been mixed in a couple of other petty, shady affairs. Also he was proud of his record and wore a large revolver with notches cut on the outside of the ivory grips and the notches filled with tar, so they'd be conspicuous. In his own way, and because he had already killed a couple of men, Pilarn was a bigger nuisance than Kadem. And Pilarn lived and was always blowing off his mouth closer to the county seat. But, like Kadem, the sheriff knew the fellow was yellow and just a show-off.

"Howdy, Sher'f!" Pilarn greeted Ludden. "You know, Sher'f, I never did see quite such an ornery bunch of deputies as you've got! Take about three of 'em to make real, honest-to-gosh specimens of my idea of what a deputy sher'f should look like."

"You know, Dud," Ludden took the remark seriously, "I've been thinking we needed something to tone up our general average? I have, for a fact. How'd you like to be deputy sher'f yo'-se'f?"

"What!" Dud perked right up, "Yo' don't mean that, honest, do you Sher'f? Yo' wouldn't put me on as deputy?"

"I need a deputy," Ludden hesitated. " 'Course, three years ago you were tried for murder. Same time, the evidence showed Dander had better than an even break. I've a warrant I'd like to have served. We can't put a man on, 'thout trying him out. I'll 'point you special deputy, give you a badge and all you got to do is go get your man."

"What man?" Pilarn inquired, suspiciously, "Butch Cassidy, Sundance Kid—some of them that's in Chubut, South America, I suppose."

"No, Dud," Ludden shook his head, "You ought to know me better than that. I never play jokes. I'm busy. All my deputies are busy. And Croup Kadem is cutting up over at Tipping Rock. 'Course, if you don't want to I'll send somebody else."

"Croup Kadem?" Dud Pilarn laughed, talking loudly. "Sure, I'll go get him! He's jes' one of those loud-talking, bluffing and bragging scoundrels that makes noisy nuisances of themselves. You don't have to think no more about Kadem. I know him. I never knowed such a plumb disgusting immodest feller in my life as him! Always did want a chance to slap his mouth for him."

ACCORDINGLY, Dud Pilarn took his horse out of the stable, rode twice around the Court House Square and headed out the west road for Tipping Rock wearing a Special Deputy badge and waving his hat. Quite a lot of people who heard about the spectacle of Bill Ludden's new deputy sheriff just couldn't believe the information. Probably a dozen different friends of Bill's came and made it a point to ask him if it was really so that he had made that mouthy scallawag Pilarn a special deputy? And they all gave the sheriff such a look of doubt and sorrow that he knew he had suffered immeasurably in his reputation for common sense.

Every one around the Court House knew what was going on. It wasn't half an hour after Dud started away with such a noisy and ambitious flourish that

the sheriff heard word had been telephoned to three or four different people in Tipping Rock that Dud Pilarm had been appointed special deputy, and sent with a warrant for Croup Kadem's arrest, and to perform whatever other duties of quieting and making orderly Tipping Rock might need or desire. Putt Purcell telephoned to Bill Ludden, presently.

"Sher'f! Is it actually so that you sent that—that Dud Pilarn over here in response to my message asking for something to be done about Kadem?" he asked.

"I sure did, Putt," Ludden admitted, "The way it happened, I didn't have a foot-loose man here, and you know Dud's active and he was available. So I 'pointed him. Between you an' me," the sheriff added when he heard Putt's gasp of disgust, "I figger them two fellers is both so yellow that maybe they'll laugh each other out of the county. It would sure help me a lot if they both was showed up and got out."

"An' I carried Tipping Rock in yo' favor!" Purcell sighed, " 'Course, you was an experiment, Ludden. Every body knows experiments generally are failures, and the main hope is they ain't going to cost too much!"

The road to Tipping Rock was long and gave anyone riding over it plenty of time to think things over and plan what should be done. Special Deputy Pilarn was in a hurry. Every ranch he passed, he traded horses, in the name of the Law, and he covered the distance in about half the time of the best previous record. He came to Tipping Rock before ten o'clock, that night. He had a fresh horse, and he made a crow-landing from the saddle as the mount came to a halt, striking on both feet and coming up running in two jumps into Putt Purcell's general store, Putt being the chief complainant, though that fact was confidential between the department and Putt.

Putt told Pilarn the facts in the matter. Kadem had come to town, ridden into several saloons on his horse, and drunk in his saddle. He had been raising hob, shootin' and breaking windows ever since. Just at the moment he was reported to be over in the south side of town, where at the outskirts was a cluster of buildings devoted to amusement and difficulty.

With this information, Pilarn leaped again to his horse and raced to the rescue of whatever imperiled dance hall, saloon or green room might need prompt assistance as regards Croup Kadem. Purcell, on the store balcony, heard Kadem whooping to the noisy strains of square dance music, presumably in the ball room of the Bijou Amusement Palace. Now that Special Deputy Pilarn had arrived in a cloud of dust and with every indication of performing his duty with as much action as possible, a lot of people started over to the scene.

Pilarn leaped from the saddle and landed on the wide wooden platform of the Bijou. His boots striking the boards with a boom like a huge drum. He paused to give his chaps a hitch and swing his belt to just the right angle, taking a loop around his right leg with a latigo string, to hold the muzzle of his holster down, tight, so when he should draw, he would be able to do so with speed.

Pushing back his broad-brimmed hat, squaring his shoulders, and taking note of the spectators Dud parted both the swing doors and headed in, left shoulder first, his large right hand gripped tightly about his ivory revolver butt.

THE galloping horse had been heard within. All had taken note of the thud of feet as the new arrival landed on the ground. The music played on but the square dancing had ceased and the couples were scattering hither and yon, nervously, like frightened birds uncertain whether to skulk or fly.

Kadem was at the head of the set, close to the music platform. He stood with the clear space of the ball room between him and the entrance from the barroom. Along both walls to right and left stood the anxious spectators as with heavy, jumping tread the special deputy came in a hurry, wasting no time; his jarring rattled the barroom glassware, some of which rang like tiny bells, so heavy were his footsteps.

As he crossed the green room he brushed over two four-hand poker tables, threw a waiter headlong out of his way, and overturned a tenderfoot, chair and all. He leaped with two quick strides ten or twelve feet into the ballroom, sweeping it with his glance, seeking his quarry. Kadem stood straight

ahead of him, dubious, eyes bulging, cornered and uncertain just what he should do.

Dud stopped short as he discovered the man he was seeking. Their glances met, their gaze came to a focus, look to look, and each saw in the other's countenance the doubts and worries, the fear of the other fellow. Two bold talkers, loud bluffers, cowtown show-offs had met face to face with grinning, if timid and wondering, spectators on either side. A greater fear than the torments afflicting them seized both, that of being humiliated by a braggart. Twisting, stirring, each sought the slight but deadly advantage of a gun started from its holster.

"I got a warrant for you!" Pilarn declared, his voice hollow and quavering.

"Yeh!" Kadem snarled, "Luden sent *yo'* after a *man?*"

"Yeh!" Pilarn exclaimed, his sniffle cat-like, "Don't yo' tech that gun, Cro-Croup!"

Color came and went in their cheeks. Their lips twitched and they licked their tongues about their teeth. They blinked, squinted, bulged their eyes by turns, just plumb scairt stiff as the old-timers who were watching realized. The side-lines relaxed, smiling, laughing silently at the spectacle of two cowards face to face, trembling and gasping for breath. Yet along the walls men who had seen that kind of trouble before edged along, stooping low, nervously, knowing that it is by such scoundrels that innocent bystanders are usually killed.

The time which had passed, perhaps thirty seconds, seemed interminable, and a woman's shrill, jeering laughter suddenly broke the quiet. Startled the two scared men facing each other jerked their guns, and neither could stop, then, so they began to shoot furiously.

The first two bullets slapped into the floor between them. The next two whacked the wall behind Kadem and shattered a window behind Pilarn in the barroom. The next four whacks were lost in frantic speed, the reverberating gunfire suddenly ending in the simultaneous and terrible thwacking of heavy lead bullets hitting flesh and bone.

Kadem stood, struggling to hold his revolver against the drag down of gravitation, a look of astonishment and alarm on his countenance, his eyes fluttering in their sockets. His wrist reached toward his brow to wipe its cold sweat but he collapsed.

Special Deputy Sheriff Dud Pilarn stepped back and forth trying to hold his balance against the sway of his frame like that of a dead tree stub about to fall. He looked around, confused, gulping, bewildered by what had happened so suddenly, grinning stupidly for he had fought a gunfight. Great weariness afflicted him, and he staggered toward a chair, dropped to his knees, sat back on his heels and then tipped over on his right shoulder to fall face downward, like a man going to sleep with his head on his elbow.

PUTT PURCELL looked the scene over and then telephoned to Sheriff Bill Ludden from the Bijou office.

"Say, Sher'f!" Purcell said, "This is Putt, at Tipping Rock. That special deputy arrived here——"

"Not already!" Ludden exclaimed, astonished.

"Yes, sir, come, got his man and done gone!" Purcell declared with enthusiasm.

"*Killed* Kadam?" Ludden cried. "You mean to say Pilarn *killed* that man Kadem? They actually shot it out together?"

"They sure did, Sher'f!" Putt answered, "They swapped bullets, an' Kadem's hit above the heart. Pilarn's hit below the heart. They're both dead, doggone near on their feet—evenest exchange yo' eveh did see!"

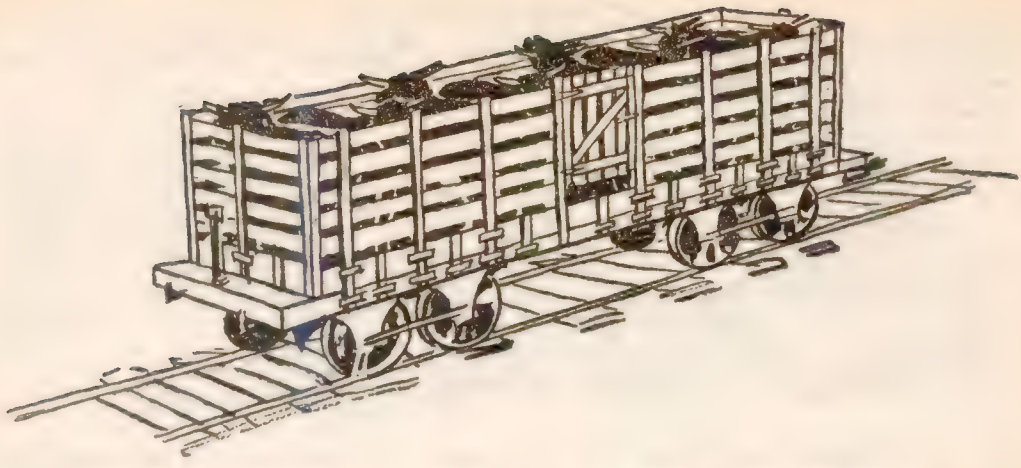
"Shu-u-u!" Ludden breathed, "I neveh expected that. Why, I thought they were both jes' sure 'nough cheap, bluffers."

"Reckon that's what they thought of each other," Putt said, "Fact is, I expect they was both sure astonished, carrying hit through man-fashion to the bitter end!"

"I see," Ludden sighed, "That's what comes of satisfying a man's curiosity. I'll send the coroner out, and the undersheriff. Much obliged, Putt. Sorry it broke thataway, adding likely some to Tipping Rock's reputation, such as it is."

"Well, anyhow, these yere parts are rid of two talking and fighting nuisances!"

"If you put it thataway, I expect," Ludden said, "*Good* night!"



ASK ME AN OLD ONE!

Dear Soogan:

Would you please give us some idea of the early conditions for shipping cattle by rail?

Carl Innes
Cincinnati, Ohio

ACCORDING to Jas. E. Downing, who had an interesting article on this subject in "The Cattleman" for June, one of the very first shipments of cattle by rail started in your town, Cincinnati, in 1852. About a hundred head of cattle were there loaded into ordinary box cars, without any facilities for ventilation, feed or water, and shipped to New York City. A few years later other stockmen experimented with shipments by rail using the old cars that had been built for hauling wood for the engines. These were flat cars with slatted sides and no roofs. Sort of a corral on wheels. Sometimes planks were laid across the top to carry feed but after they had a few fires from engine sparks this was discontinued. It was these open flat cars that handled all the early shipments of cattle from the West.

Those early shippers faced pretty rough conditions. The roadbeds were rough and poorly kept up, the equipment was always in need of repair, the cars were loosely coupled together by the old-fashioned long link with the result that they always stopped and started with a terrific jerk that would floor most anything, and the highest speed allowed on most roads in 1872 was fifteen miles an hour, the average being about ten. Under such conditions and paying very high rates the early cattleman had to ship his stock and still make money.

Because the charges on stock were so much a carload lot, and because the cowmen were able to dispose of animals killed in transit rather well in Chicago, they always loaded the old stock cars to capacity and then stuck in a few extra for good measure. A couple of cowboy attendants would then accompany the train. Whenever they got the chance these fellows would water and feed their charges, throwing the hay in loose and watering with an old-fashioned wash tub. But sometimes the cattle would go for days without feed or water.

Also the attendants were supposed to patrol the cars on little foot rails on the side and keep all stock on their feet. This job was done with much cussing and a long pole that had a spike in the end. With this the animals were prodded and punched until they got to their feet. It is from this that the term "cow-puncher" comes.

But sometimes an animal would not respond to the prod pole. Then one of those very exceptional men who could go right into the car with the cattle came in handy. These fellows could work through the tightly packed cattle until they came to the down animal and then with seemingly little effort get him to his feet. The amount of nerve this required was tremendous, because those cattle were wild longhorns and the floor of the car was always covered with four of five inches of slime.

Today, with improved cattle cars, conditions are much better. There is no over-crowding and the law requires cattle to be unloaded at least once in every thirty-six hours to be watered and fed.

Soogan Sam.

BLACK MADNESS

FOSTER-HARRIS, author of *Black Madness,* the spine-tingling oilfield novel in this issue has sent us clippings and accounts galore to show the reality of the things that happen in his story. We are sorry that we have room to print only a part of Mr. Foster-Harris's letter. He says:

"First, that cannon that figures in the fight at the pipeline station. Cannon actually are used to fight oil tank fires precisely as I explain in this yarn. It's an odd and little known detail of oilfield color and there are a flock of true stories about such use of cannon. Some of 'em are just as wild as the wildest fiction you ever read.

"I can recall one oldtime oil man telling a dozen of us about the time some big oil tanks caught on fire back in Pennsylvania, in the early boom days. Oil City, I believe was the place. Anyway there was a whole battery of artillery on hand, militia, and in their enthusiasm about shooting holes in the blazing tanks they did too good a job, turned loose a wild flood of oil which couldn't be handled, caught fire, flowed down into the creek and just about burned the whole darn field clear off the map. It was some yarn!

"Now for the rum runner fights down on the Mexican border. In the last few months the Border Patrol, I hear, has had no less than eighteen distinct and heated gun battles with smugglers and alien runners. If anybody craves some action there's an outfit to join! I've met a number of 'em and they're mighty nice guys. Also the Border Patrol force is under civil service rules, I understand, and it's possible to join up, if you can pass the examinations.

"And I certainly don't need to enlarge on the business of the Law sometimes being hooked up with the 'Line'; nor on the ranchers who have made vast fortunes when oil has been discovered on their land. The daily papers have covered all that thoroughly.

"Pipeline stations generally divide up into three kinds, local gathering stations, main line stations, and booster stations. The names explain themselves.

"On a booster station quite often you'll find just one man running the whole works. He'll be the engineer, the gauger and the telegraph operator, all combined. Each man usually works an eight hour shift, so there'll be three men in all, two off, one on. The operator reports over the telegraph wire every hour. Of course on the bigger stations they have to have more men.

"That's about all, I reckon. Hope you like the yarn.

"Yours,
Foster-Harris

LOCALE

GEORGE C. HENDERSON, who wrote *Easy Does It,* one of the strong short-stories he sometimes does as a rest from writing novels, is also careful to be correct in the use of material. He explains:

"Unless I make an explanation some Westerner will keelhaul me for having my hero in *Easy Does It* hunting blue dick rabbits on a desert ranch. My alibi is that the U Cross was right in the foothills of the Sierra del Norte Mountains. I've hunted blue dicks myself up in the "red dirt" of the Sierra Nevadas so I know what I'm talking about, though I used a shotgun and missed a-plenty, slingin' the weepon around at them lightnin' critters. I never knew of but one

cowboy that could get them with a six-shooter.

"George C. Henderson."

WANDERLUST

AGAIN we are printing a story by an author new to WEST—*Hell On Wheels McGorgan,* by *Paul Evan Lehman.* And Mr. Lehman has obligingly acceded to our request to introduce himself to WEST readers in the following letter.

"At the ripe age of two-and-a-half years a strange malady known as the wanderlust became apparent in me. Then, with a tiny straw hat on my head and drawing a red wagon behind me I set out to see the world. An unromantic uncle overtook me half-way to town, and ended my first adventure in the great wide world, but I have been "going places and doing things" ever since.

"I've been nearly everywhere from Canada to Mexico, and from the Carolinas to California, with many stopovers between points. I've turned my hand to many things—automobile mechanic; aviator; railroad section hand; clerk; rider in a motion picture company and later in a Wild West Show; cow hand; teacher—oh, most everything. And still there is that insatiable urge to "go places and do things."

"I am writing this on the eve of my departure to see friends on the old 7K ranch. I've oiled the old Colt's, for something seems to tell me that I'll be horning in on the spring roundup. No, I'm not in the West this time. Trying a new range—Florida. Instead of a rope, I'll have a twenty-two foot stock whip tied on the horn. The boys down here are expert with this weapon, and can take a cigarette out of your mouth at twenty feet with it. I haven't been able to do that yet, chiefly for the reason that I can never get anybody to hold the cigarette. Even my old buddy, Hapsburg Liebe, hasn't quite enough faith in me to volunteer.

"Like many of WEST's stories, *Hell On Wheels McGorgan* is based on fact. A deputy, so peace-loving that he was ever busy pouring oil on troubled waters, got himself into a jam very similar to the one in the story. He got out of it, but I reckon the experience added many a gray hair to his sandy mop.

"Cordially yours,

"Paul Evan Lehman."

PIZEN OAK SEZ

THE old man sometimes gets sore at the boys spendin' so much time practisin' fer the rodeos—but they shore work faster brandin' calves—it works two ways.

J. C. WATSON

The author of *The Coyote Hole,* which appears in this issue, has been kind enough to accede to our request for something about himself. He has certainly been there and back, and should have plenty of stories tucked away in his head.

I was born in England in 1894 and very early after leaving school I was bitten by the adventure bug. At eighteen, having quite decided to make a cowboy of myself, I sailed for Argentina where I got a job on one of the big *estancias,* or stock ranches.

When the boss was around I chased beef and when he wasn't I chased the *Avestrus*—the long-legged, emu-like bird of the *pampas* which runs like a racehorse. After many months of practice with a rawhide *lazo,* I got so that I could swing it without having to get down to pick my hat up.

After two years and three different jobs in various parts of Argentina, the war came along, in 1914, and my feet began to itch. In Buenos Ayres I signed up on a Liverpool-bound ship carrying army remounts for cavalry and artillery. My job was to feed and water twenty-five head of them for the five weeks it took us to make the trip.

My next job was a long one. Four years and one month in the British army

—field artillery, and later, trench mortars.

After being discharged I took on a job in Greece with a British land company (concession). It was a very white collar job and nine months of it was ample.

During the next two years I worked all over Western Canada at anything that would raise a sweat; later, the same thing in U. S. A.—logging camps, construction work and "dirt moving outfits."

Lately I've been trying my hand at writing stories. It's just about the hardest job I ever tackled and I feel mighty encouraged to have made the WEST grade once or twice.

J. C. Watson

FREIGHTING

GEORGE PERKINS of Overton, Nevada, recounts a freighting accident.

"One time in '98 I started from the Colorado to Milford, I had two wagons and a hay bailer pulled by ten head of horses. Between St. Thomas and the river there is a bad dugway and on the dugway I met the pony express rider. He was traveling at a gallop which seared my leaders who instead of pulling toward the cliff pulled toward the ledge and pulled the right wheeler off. I jumped off the wagon and ran around the leaders with the intentions of cutting the wheelhorse loose. I got there to find I had left my knife in the jockey box on the wagon. I started back on a run which seared my leaders still more and started them to swing back and forth in the road. This caused them to pull the other wheel horse over and the added weight pulled the whole outfit over. I could see nothing but dust so I ran down the hill and around to where they were. They were standing up, every horse hitched up to both wagons and the bailer right side up. I got on and drove in to St. Thomas minus nothing but a lot of hide from off the horses' backs."

THE CHUCK WAGON
(Driv'n by Old Pizen Oak)

FLY time—I'm a-settin' on the cookshack step swattin' flies an' cussin' life in gen'ral when I see one o' the boys ridin' up the trail from town. I thinks maybe he's got the stuff for the September 3rd WEST, an' shore as dogs have fleas, I'm right!

As he gets a might nearer I sees he's got his knee hooked over the horn an' is settin' thar on the saddle readin', lettin' his horse take him home or to hell—I reckon he wouldn't know which.

He starts to rein out o' sight an' sneak up to the stables out'n me seein' him—but ol' Pizen ain't gonna take nothin' like that from none o' these yere young would-be cowpokes, nossir! I sends a forty-five slug so clos't to him his horse takes off fer the moon, an' the waddie an' them stories goes in several different directions—but finally down.

I runs over an' has the literchoor before the cowpusher knows what struck him.

An' fellers I found there what's needed to make a dry, hot, fly-bit August day into a knee-high meader on the first o' June—yessir—nothin' but a new story by *W. C. Tuttle—Lead Language*—a whippin,' whoopin', hell-fer-shootin' story by old Tut hisself. Right then an' there life looked different to me—an' I rambled through adventures galore till late in the night with no one else but SAD SONTAG.

Fellers, spite o' bein' strewed all over the ground by said careless waddie—this here September 3rd WEST sure looks to be one o' them top numbers which comes every so often—a issue in which every story is so consarned good yuh can't hardly say which is the best.

Trade Goods is the complete novel. The author, *E. S. Pladwell,* ain't had a story printed in WEST before but that ain't sayin' this ain't a bang-up novel. I think it's that an' then some—an' it has something different in it. The top-hand is a trader—a feller tryin' to start a store in a new country.

The novelette is by *Norrell Gregory*—featurin' Pole Cawhorn—that prince of a he-man good feller, which all WEST readers is plenty fond of. *The Devil's Causeway* is the title an' ol' Pole shore runs up agin a bunch o' fightin' devils—an' no mistake!

The Puncher Who Couldn't be Fired is one of the best stories *Steve Payne* ever laid a pen to—an' you all know that's sayin' somethin'.

Renegades is one of *Hal Davenport's* top-performances—plumb full of real cow work. In *Mountain Men* by *William F. Bragg* a deputy runs up agin a job that nigh tears the heart out'n him—but he comes through on top, at that.

Pinto Dan is the *Griff Crawford*

WEST gives a prize of twenty-five dollars every two weeks for the most interesting letter from a reader. Every one has a chance—no date limits—a new prize every issue! The letter can be about anything in the West (either the country or the magazine). It can be facts, suggestions, criticism, or history——Don't fail to try your luck!

HERE is a rare bit of Western lore that Mrs. Frances H. Rarig of 1711 Ravenna Boulevard, Seattle, Washington, has sent us. This letter written to *The Young People's Weekly* by the wife of an intimate friend of Kit Carson is here reprinted so as to reproduce, as nearly as possible, the original.

Dear Young Peaples Weekly,

in ap 30 you have a peace written by W. D. Hulbert about Kit Carson. in my childhood I lived in Colorado. I marraed a scout, one that wintard with Kit Carson, and they, my husband and Kit, lived together one year after the ware. I can tell you my husband loved Kit well. he said he had dark gray Eyes and was girman parantage. I have seen his son meny a time in Pueblo, Col. he looked like his Mixican mother. I Never see Kit Carson But my husband got a sut of Buckskin Cloth made like those he wore. itt was a shirt with a yoak. the yoak had a Buckskin fring 4 inchees long and on coat sleeve, all up the arn seeam outside, cuff and yoak. Pockets and front pleets all worked in read, pink, green roses and leaves. the trowasars or pants fring run up the outside seam fron foot to waistband. the pocket tabs and the legs fron foot to kne was worked in the same Beautifull Mixican inbrodary. Butons were Brass, cap beavor, scotch shape, Crown black Velvett, too mink tails hanging down Behind.

My husband and me War not marrade tell 1872. This Was in 1866 or 67 or8. or about that time. i was only a little girl. I took a childish fancy to buck skin Joe (Colorado not California Joe.) I see California Buckskin Joe too. Hee was a famous scout, tall and thin, with black hair, large and gray eyes, and tender smile. he was old, getting gray, I dont no his name.

But my Buck skin Joe only was a scout a little while, 2 years in the ware in 1860, and after one year With Carson on the plains. He was in sevral indian fights with Carson. While with him had this sute made just like Carsons. itt cost $40. he sold it to some one that cam fom back east, took a fancy to itt, for $80. my husband could sitt and talk all Night of the good kind deeds don by kitt. Deads that the wourld Never new of. How tenderly he could cair for a sick comrad. soo once for my man. He was shot through his left hand with an indian arrow. went clear through senter of hand and stuck fast in the lift cheek Bone. the other man had to place Him on his back, lay the Wagon Pole over his face. Two men held this down on his head, While a third taking hold of the arrow Puled itt out. rather rugh you say. Well yes, but this is life in the west and one gets youst to itt butt I can tell you fron that day till he died his face was never well. 25 years. the poison kep breaking out. When he was deying itt got in his left eye. for weeks itt run. the pain caused him to wander in his mind. O what did nott the Brave scouts suffer!

I am glad you see fit to Write kindly of one. I wonder whear Kit Carson died? I dont no. He took cair of my Buckskin Joe When he was Wounded and often Joe would tell how soft and Jentle his hands Was whend drissing the wounds fron this indian arrow. Please excuse Writing. I am soo cold, I shake soo, I cant write. I must be braive and grin, for I an youst to itt.

Buckskin Joe Colorado was Joel W. Churchill, Co. 1, 3 reg. mun. Vol. He died New Pine Creek, Or., 1894. Soo his Grave is fair away. We can Nott place a flag or flower on the graive.

I have lived in the days When indians killed 2 little Boys on the wood pil near the Hous. The Braive scouts were well known to us then little girls. I wonder ofton what becam of Kit Carson. I thought the Buckskin sut i Discribe the Hansamost i ever see and I seen meny a one. With good wishes to young peaple I will Close. Only an Old scouts widow, sad and lonly, left behind to Wate.

yours truly,

Mrs. linda Churchill

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poem. *The Thrown-Away Man* is the *Hapsburg Liebe* extra-short—one of the best WEST has run of these short pieces —an' that strong fightin' serial *The Town-Tamer* by *William Corcoran* goes into a swift ending that's well worth readin' even if yuh ain't read the first part of the story.

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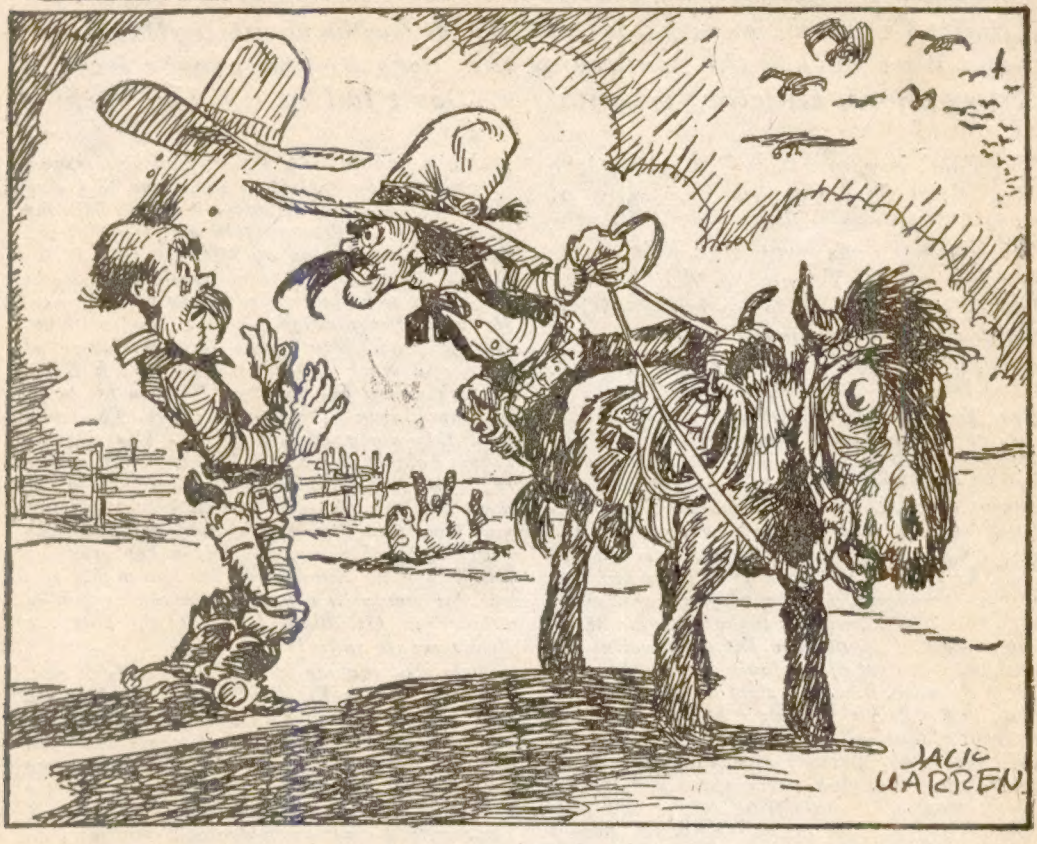
The Laugh Corral



1st Rancher: *Say! What was wrong with that horse you sold me?*
2nd Rancher: *Nothin's fer as I recollect. Why.*
1st Rancher: *Went to feed him this mornin', an' he was dead!*
2nd Rancher: *Hm, that's funny. He never done that before!*

James R. Joling, 1218 Courtney Street, N. W., Grand Rapids, Mich.

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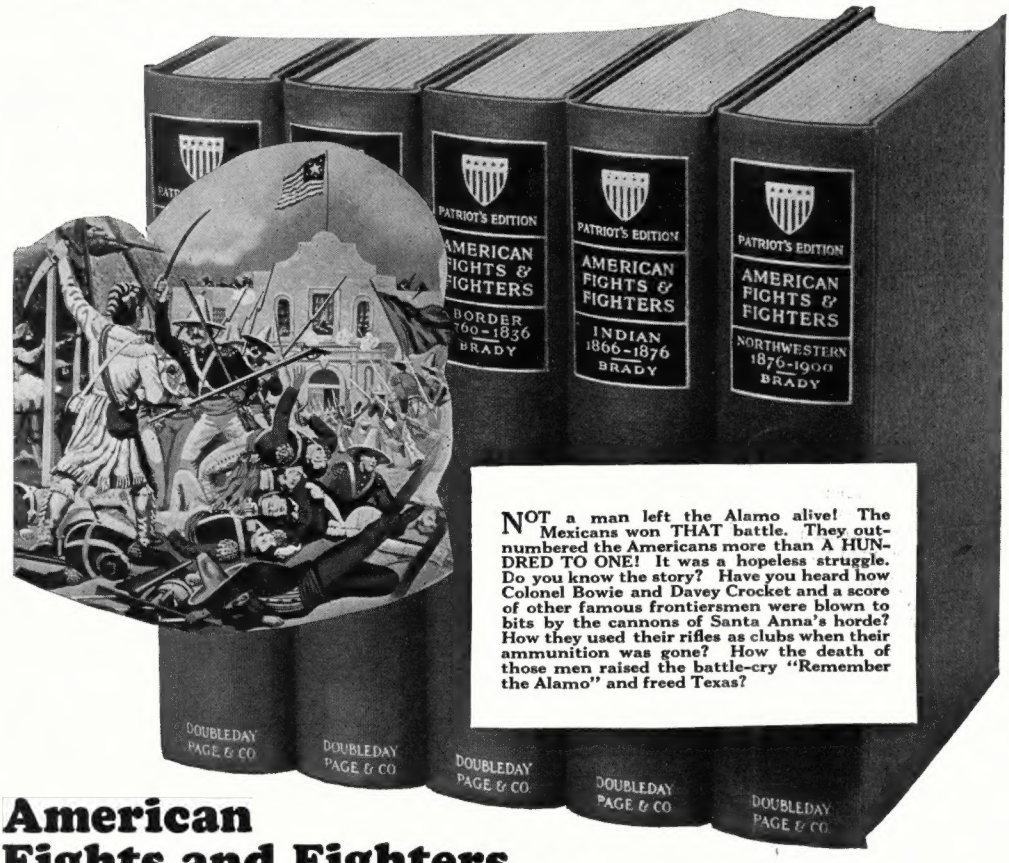
"Remember the Alamo!"



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